

## MUSLIMS IN FRANCE

# “The Future Is Open”

**BY CHUCK SUDETTIC**

Integration is a tortuous, generations-long climb for France’s Muslims.

Perhaps nowhere is the ascent tougher than from one of France’s roughest housing projects, the Cité Félix-Pyat in Marseille. Perhaps nowhere is the effort to open the way more pronounced than in the Goutte d’Or in Paris.

**A** **NIMOSITY TOWARD MUSLIMS** has been a feature of the landscape in France since before the days of Charles Martel and Roland. Today, about 10 million of France’s almost 70 million people are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants born in Algeria, Tunisia, and other Muslim-majority countries. These “Muslims”—a significant number are not Arabs, and many have drifted away from Islam—have long since grown weary of the discrimination they encounter while seeking jobs or admission to universities and even while walking the streets or traveling on metros and trains. Since April 2011, they have had to deal with divisions among themselves cut by a new law banning women in public places from covering their faces with the burqa, niqab, and any other garments and by demands by right-wing political leaders for the police to crack down on Muslims blocking city streets to pray.

But Muslims are as never before ascending into the ranks of France’s professional and cultural élite. They are rising, like the sports superstar Zinédine Zidane and like a young business student named Yacine Barhim, from crowded apartments in high-rise complexes ringing the city’s urban centers. They are emerging, like a translator named Mehrézia Labidi Maïza, from the ethnic mélange

in inner-city neighborhoods such as the famous Goutte d'Or near Paris's Gare du Nord, where each Friday, until a recent government ban on street prayer, men had spread their prayer rugs over the asphalt of rue Myrha. And they are ascending in comfortable suburbs after having come to France on government scholarships to the country's prestigious universities and graduated as lawyers, physicians, entrepreneurs, and professors.

Even as racists have complained about the "color" of France's national football team, the French people have lionized the son of Algerian immigrants, Zidane, who led *Les Bleus* to the 1998 Football World Cup Championship . . . and its gut-wrenching disaster in the cup finals eight years later. A one-armed actor and comedian of Moroccan descent, Jamel Debbouze, has entertained the Francophone world with his stand-up routines and roles as the fruit-monger's helper in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* and the pharaoh's architect in *Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre*. In 2004, Nicolas Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, appointed the first person of Muslim origin to be a senior police chief. As president, Sarkozy appointed Rachida Dati to be minister of justice. In August 2009, at the world championship track meet in Rome, a Frenchman outdueled a Kenyan in the final yards of the steeplechase to become the only European to medal in a men's distance race; his name: Bouabdellah Tahri. During his victory lap, all of France was mourning dozens of Comorians from Marseille who perished in an airplane crash.

Integration is a tortuous, generations-long climb for France's Muslims. The grade grows steeper whenever popular

prejudice is aggravated by car burnings and attacks on the police by immigrants or their young adult children. Perhaps nowhere is the ascent tougher than from one of France's roughest housing projects, the Cité Félix-Pyat in Marseille. Perhaps nowhere is the effort to open the way more pronounced than in the Goutte d'Or.

## Marseille | 3RD ARRONDISSEMENT, CITÉ FÉLIX-PYAT

Yacine Barhim, born in 1991, was once one of about 5,000 people (nobody knows exactly how many there are) who were crowded into the eight white apartment blocks that make up Cité Félix-Pyat. Barhim said he did not hear the hand grenade that detonated in the parking lot of the local police station just after 11 p.m. on July 3, 2009. Flying shrapnel punctured tires and bodies of police cruisers and riddled the door of the elementary school next door. The police station had suffered 28 attacks with stones, cement bricks, and Molotov cocktails since the beginning of 2009, but none had gone this far. Police officers in riot gear mounted raids in the adjacent high-rises after the bomb went off. They spared the Barhim family's three-room, 15th floor apartment.

The son of a car-parts-factory worker from Algeria, Yacine Barhim grew up closely knit with his brother and sister and their parents. When the grenade exploded, Barhim was contending with his future. He had just completed a French rite of passage: *le bac*, the final examination at the end of secondary school. He had concentrated his studies on

science and math and had passed with highest honors. For Barhim, this was a first step out of the Cité, a first step away from the domestic disputes down the hall, the brawls on the street below, the men and boys smoking pot, the drug dealers who keep regular hours (and even close for the daylight hours during Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting), and the trash, including, at times, refrigerators, television sets, mattresses, and dirty diapers, that some Cité residents hurl from their windows for others to clean up.

Marseille was once France's main port for ships transporting raw materials from its colonies in Africa and beyond. Today, people of Muslim background account for about 20 percent of the city's 4.7 million people, the second highest density in all of France. Marseille is roughly divided between the housing projects that sweep across its northern districts and the more affluent, and more French, districts in the south. The city's mostly Muslim 3rd arrondissement straddles the north and the south, and Cité Félix-Pyat rises on a bluff above the city's container port at the arrondissement's far western edge. The Cité, like the rest of the 3rd arrondissement, is mostly a staging area for a mix of immigrants on a low rung of France's socioeconomic ladder: Tunisians, Algerians, Moroccans, Comorians, Roma from Spain, and Arabic-speaking Roma who call themselves "Baghdadi" and claim to have Iraqi origins. They are people who are either working their way up and out or lingering in poverty and a cultural isolation that satellite television and the internet have only deepened. In Félix-Pyat, the imam at the local mosque has lived in France for decades and never bothered to learn French.

Crime is rampant in Marseille's housing projects, where young toughs and criminal gang members have given up on stealing cell phones and now rob shopkeepers and pedestrians with \$500 AK-47s. For a time, taxis and even emergency doctors refused to enter Cité Félix-Pyat. Police officers at the stationhouse do not stray into the Cité individually or in pairs. When they do come, they come in numbers, wearing helmets and body armor, and packing tasers, nine-millimeter automatics, and tear gas grenades.

"People shoot video, so the cops have to be careful of what they do," said one police officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "The people do not fear the justice system. There is no deterrence. When someone is arrested, they are often released without having spent even 12 hours in custody. The police feel frustrated. We can't stand a place where there are no rules, no laws."

Nor could Yacine Barhim. "I would prefer it if my kids did not grow up in such a place," he said. "I want to work in finance. I want to be a trader. I want to make a lot of money and move out of the Cité, with my family."

"I love math. It is logical. It doesn't matter if your name is Jacques or Muhammad, the answer is the answer. Other kids are not aware of the value of education. Life for them is in the Cité. They stay there. The parents are lax. They let the boys run. There are no girls around. The girls, I think, are all kept inside. The parents don't let them go out. This is why the girls do better than the boys. There were more girls in my school than boys."

To earn his success, Barhim attended regular classes from the early morning to the late afternoon and went to tutoring sessions three nights a week. On the night of the grenade explosion, Barhim was waiting to hear whether he had won a scholarship to move to Paris for the obligatory preparation course for high school graduates from deprived neighborhoods. “No one at school told me about the scholarship program,” Barhim said. “They give you no idea of what you can do.” He was accepted into one of the world’s most-prestigious institutions for mathematics, the École normale supérieure in Paris, the alma mater of Pasteur, Durkheim, and nine recipients of the Fields Medal, the most prestigious award a mathematician can win. But he chose to enter the country’s top school of business, the École des hautes études commerciales de Paris. His family moved out of the Cité Félix-Pyat and resettled in the capital.

It was Barhim’s tutor, Nil B., who urged him to apply for the scholarship. “Half of my time I spend on counseling and answering questions like ‘How do I become an architect?’ ‘How do I become a nurse?’” he said. “Without guidance, success on the *le bac* means nothing.” Nil B. was himself born in France to Algerian parents who had come in search of work and established themselves in a mountain village a few hours’ drive from Marseille. His father worked in construction and came home only on weekends; his mother raised the children and toiled around town in the family car. No one seemed to notice that she covered her head in a veil similar to the one the Virgin Mary is wearing in centuries of portraits by Western artists. Nil B.’s mother was the one who convinced his father that they would not be committing the sin of usury

to take a loan to buy their house. Nil B. earned highest honors on *le bac*. He went on to obtain masters degrees in physics and history; one of his sisters has become a doctor, another is an engineer, and a third is in communications; two brothers are in computer science, a third is a doctor of physics. “At my graduate school in Aix-en-Provence, they advised me not to go for a doctorate only because I was a Muslim,” he said. “They said many people in Aix do not like Muslims. I think this was the biggest disappointment I have ever faced.”

Nil B. became a schoolteacher. He volunteered to tutor for *le bac*. By 2009, when he was 30, he had helped 150 kids. “They can get out of the Cité only through education,” he said.

Nil B.’s wife, Leslie D., is the daughter of parents who number among the million or so *pieds-noirs*, French colonists forced out of Algeria after its war with France in the 1960s. She has been a substitute teacher at Cité Félix-Pyat’s elementary school. She said many *pieds-noirs* look down upon Arabs and other Muslims. Her parents objected when she started dating Nil, and even threw away her mobile phone to keep her from talking with him. She subsequently converted to Islam, married Nil, and lived for years in a cramped studio apartment in the 3rd arrondissement, a short stroll from Cité Félix-Pyat. It took several years for her father and mother to accept the *fait accompli* and come to like Nil. “My parents wonder if this is France,” Leslie D. said of the 3rd arrondissement. “They think it is a dangerous place. My father has a BMW. He doesn’t drive it here. We have a tiny Renault. We are fed up with having our car broken into. It happens about 10 times a year.”

“Generally,” she said, “the level of the pupils at the school in Cité Félix-Pyat is low. Most kids are on their own. Their parents don’t help, some because they can’t, because they are illiterate or, in some instances, because they have infants to care for. I tell the kids to ask their older brothers and sisters for help, but most of them don’t care. They don’t think it is important to help the little brother or sister.

“When they are in groups, they show off. It becomes impossible when two-thirds of the classroom doesn’t want to work. The administrators end up concentrating the troublemakers in one class. They aren’t supposed to do it, but they do anyway.”

Neither Leslie D. nor Nil B. opposes the face-cover ban because, they said, concealing a woman’s face has nothing to do with Islam and gives it a bad image. “But many Muslims are fed up with anti-Islamic laws and debates,” Leslie D. said, “because in France, the media and political people speak of Islam in negative ways. Now this, and it affects only 1,900 women in a country of 70 million.”

It was the drive to succeed that lifted Sonia Ben-Hassine out of Cité Félix-Pyat. Until the day she left for college, Ben-Hassine lived on the 15th floor of a building with her parents, a shoemaker, now deceased, and his wife. Her parents refused to buy property in France, assuming they would return to Tunisia and live in the house they bought and remodeled there. They confined their children to their apartment, except to send them back and forth to school. Ben-Hassine, who was born in 1974, attended a private Roman Catholic school until

she entered secondary school. She began to pray at age 11, but that only lasted a brief time. By age 23, she had questions about her faith. “I am not against God,” Ben-Hassine concluded. “I am against religion.” She also finds the notion that Islam respects women to be hypocritical: “She is so pure, we have to hide her. She is so free, we have to confine her. It is against Islam to beat your wife, except if she disobeys Islam. So, okay, the wife says, ‘I won’t fast.’ And then the husband can beat her.”

**“I would worry,” Ben-Hassine said, “if my sisters began wearing a headscarf.** But I am against a law barring women from covering their faces. The *burqa* is a prison. It is oppressive. Among the women who wear them in France there are some with deep religious convictions and there are many others who are forced. But forbidding it doesn’t solve anything. It violates *liberté*. It stigmatizes. And it is a move against Muslim people by the right wing in France.”

In 2002, after completing a business degree and mastering English, Ben-Hassine, like thousands of young adults in France, left home and migrated to the center of the French universe, to a Paris that is both a churning, integrating machine and a patchwork of ghettos that could be mistaken for neighborhoods in Algeria, Senegal, or other countries. Ben-Hassine landed her first job at a French oil company. Her next position was with Yves Saint Laurent, preparing advertising campaign launches. She worked in public relations at Chanel for a time before becoming a private consultant for concerts and other cultural events. As her savings grew, she invested in real estate in Marseille’s 3rd arrondissement. By the summer

of 2009, she had purchased five apartments and become the public relations representative for a rap band. Two years later, she was a teacher.

In Paris, she said, “nobody bothers you about what you believe.” If a Muslim woman enjoyed a coffee in Félix-Pyat during Ramadan, she explained, people would comment. In Paris there is no reaction. You can be anonymous.

“For me, Goutte d’Or is an Arab shopping center.”

## Paris | 18<sup>TH</sup> ARRONDISSEMENT, GOUTTE D’OR

The Goutte d’Or and other neighborhoods of Paris’s 18th arrondissement have won fame for their drug dealers, pickpockets, and prostitutes. These streets have a legacy of violence, including the assassination of an Algerian imam outside the mosque on rue Myrha that presaged a series of terrorist bombings in 1995. But local people consider the neighborhood an exhilarating place to live—and much more. They believe it is a petri dish in a grand experiment, an effort to develop a model for people from dozens of different, sometimes antagonistic, ethnic groups and cultures to cohabit and thrive.

The streets, the people, and the atmosphere of Goutte d’Or exude a multicultural authenticity. Here, African priestesses perform their rites. Jews pray in their synagogues. Masses are sung in Saint Bernard, a Roman Catholic church that

has stared down the authorities as it has provided sanctuary to hundreds of *sans papiers*, illegal immigrants with no identification documents. Draped in cobalt-blue and sunshine-yellow *boubou* gowns, Comorian mothers seem to float along the sidewalks past men in calf-length robes and sandals and beards tinted orange with henna. Merchants display bolts of fine cloth. Golden rings and bangles glisten in jewelry shop windows. Fishmongers call out the day's catch. *Halal* butchers dangle sheep heads and racks of meat from hooks. Cakes and pastries of almond and pistachio beckon. Grocers scoop nuts and beans from barrels and sacks. Melodies from Dakar, Beirut, and Algiers compete with the whine of motorbikes. Tiny cafés serve mint tea and cardamom-spiced coffee. Draped on clothes lines from balconies hang tiny shirts and pants and dresses: the flags of child-nation.

The Socialist Party won control over the administration of Paris in 2001 and reformed state policies toward Muslims and areas like the Goutte d'Or, seeing them as assets to be cultivated rather than urban dystopias. The Goutte d'Or has benefited from a clean-up campaign. Excavators have cleared away dilapidated buildings to make space for modern structures. (This has alarmed long-time residents who fear that urban renewal will attract foreign trust-fund babies and wealthy young professionals who will dilute the ethnic diversity, drive up rents, and relegate the locals to the high-rise housing complexes of the city's distant outskirts.) Muslim leaders are no longer overlooked when invitation lists to the key civic celebrations are being drawn up. Ramadan is observed locally, and sports halls are used during Friday

prayers and the Aïd el Kebir festival marking the end of the month of fasting.

In 2004, Paris's city hall established the Institut des Cultures de l'Islam and located it in the 18th arrondissement. The Institut has placed itself at the vanguard of the dual struggle to end discrimination and to promote positive images of both Islam and the rich culture of the ethnically and racially complex Muslim community. "It is our duty to help Islam to secularize," Hamou Bouakkaz, the Islamic relations officer of the Mayor's Office wrote. Other official organized efforts are designed to help immigrants, and especially young, skilled job-seekers and women, find positions. Adoption of the European Union Race Directive in June 2000 prompted the French authorities to create a public body to investigate allegations of discrimination, to act on behalf of people who appear to have been illegally wronged, and to report offenses to the public prosecutor.

**"We are developing a new model of society,"** said Mehrézia Labidi Maïza, a native of Tunisia, who now resides just north of the elevated stretch of the number 2 metro line that gazes over the Goutte d'Or. She became a candidate to represent the Tunisians in France to the constituent assembly of "Arab Spring" Tunisia. "Fifteen years ago, this area of Paris was depressed, with run-down houses lacking facilities," she said of the Goutte d'Or. "Now it is bursting with life."

Maïza came to France as a student in 1986 with her husband, who had been accepted into a university program in telecommunications. She has succeeded as a free-

lance translator—from Arabic and French to English—for publishers and universities in France, Qatar, and Canada and for French banks and insurance companies. “When people discover that you are competent,” she said, “they look less at your appearance and your country of origin.”

“We became French citizens,” she said. “We could no longer face living on the margins of society. This helped me feel more French and encouraged me to get involved in dialog between the area’s Muslims, Jews, Christians, and adherents of other faiths as well as the *laïcistes*,” people who have organized in defense of *laïcité*, the secular nature of French public life. “*Laïcité* is a positive factor,” she said. “It offers the different religions space.”

“Our children are playing separately in school,” she said, “We have to educate them to live together. This has to be done through dialog. We must know each other’s values and collaborate.”

Maïza has helped organize discussion groups of parents, teachers, psychologists, and other specialists. She has spoken at schools about social and theological aspects of Islam. She has written articles, published books, and contributed to school texts. One book, published with the headmaster of a Jewish school, is entitled, *Abraham Wake Up, They’ve Gone Mad*.

“Most young people born here feel rejected,” she said. “They live in search of an identity. Some think their identity is 100 percent religious. There is a risk in this of creating an exclusive identity. This is not good for them, or for France.”

Neither, Maïza said, was passage of the law banning the covering of the face. “I think this law is useless, and counterproductive. Instead of convincing the women who wear the *niqab* to remove it, they simply pass a law banning it. It tells Muslims we can only deal with you by passing laws. What is next, a law against beards or fasting at Ramadan?”

“The challenge is to bring dialog to those with exclusivist minds. We can’t fight ideas with repression. This favors radicalism. I have called imams to tell them to fight the radicalist spirit within the community. It is up to the religious leaders to take responsibility in this area.”

Even at age 23, Idriss Aberkane was still wearing the scarf of the Muslim Scouts of France. He grew up in a prosperous Paris suburb. Both his father, an Algerian who also wears the Scout scarf, and his mother, an Italian Roman Catholic, earned doctorates in mathematics and work as university professors. Aberkane attended Catholic schools before graduating with a masters of science from the elite school that Yasmine Barhim of Cité Fèlix-Pyat aspired to enter: the *École normale supérieure*. Aberkane is now working in cognitive neurosciences. He was a year old when his father placed him in the hands of a master of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam reviled as heretical by adherents of conservative Islamic sects.

The Muslim Scouts of France, a movement accredited by both the European and French Scout organizations, was founded by a Sufi master in 1991, when tensions were running high between Muslims and French and Arabic immigrants due to the first Gulf War. “My father was the president of the Scout

movement here,” Aberkane said. “I attended my first camp when I was six.” The Muslim Scouts do everything prescribed by Robert Baden-Powell, the British founder of the Scout movement. They camp. They roll out early to fish and hike. They learn to treat others as they would be treated. They learn self-reliance and teamwork and how to tell the difference.

At Scout camp, Aberkane worked with teenagers. “They are living a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he said. “You are from the [housing projects on the outskirts of French cities]. You are uneducated. You are an immigrant. There is little hope to become somebody.” These young men cannot claim to be French, because they are not called French in the neighborhood. In their community, they are warned not to lose their cultural identity. “When I talked to them,” Aberkane said, “their ambitions were related to gangsta rap and being a local leader in any group, be it marginalized in French society or not. They fail because they are expected to fail by themselves and others.” They do not see clearly that they can set a goal and work toward achieving it. They cannot see how to change their situation. “This,” Aberkane said, “pushes them toward radical Islam.”

**“I’m trying to convey a dream,” Aberkane said.  
“The future is open.”**

Mohammed Colin has made himself a bridge between the French and Muslim worlds. Colin’s father is a Roman Catholic Frenchman. His mother is the French-born daughter of Algerian parents who were *harkis*, Muslims who fought for France during Algeria’s war of independence and who found

themselves in displacement camps in France after the fighting ended in 1962. Colin grew up in Dreux, a manufacturing town about 80 kilometers northwest of Paris. Immigrants and their offspring, most of them Muslim, comprise about 40 percent of the 35,000 townspeople.

“My mother did not practice Islam,” Colin said. “My parents named me Martin. I started out as a Catholic.” During early adolescence, Colin turned to Islam. He saw a continuity between Christianity and Islam. His mother was alarmed. His father took it better. After Martin had become Mohammed, his initiation to intolerance came with a single-syllable pejorative for “Arab.” “You’re a *beur*,” a white French kid told him.

When Colin was 18, France’s headscarf controversy was making headlines. Radical Muslims were attempting to spread the civil war in Algeria to the territory of France. Radicals assassinated the imam at the mosque on the rue Myhra after he dared oppose them. Within days they began a bombing campaign in the Paris metro. “There was a feeling that we were a people apart,” Colin said. “For me it became extremely important to show you could be French and Muslim at the same time.”

With no government funding, he established Jeunes Musulmans de France, an organization of Muslim young adults that is still promoting integration and dialog in cities and towns across the country. In 2002, after finishing his studies, Colin cofounded *SaphirNews*, the first website dedicated to providing daily reports about Islam and the Muslims of France and other European countries. In 2008,

he founded a French-language monthly that plumbs issues related to the Muslim community.

From the summer of 2009 to the autumn of 2011, the stories in *SaphirNews* focused upon solutions, successes, and struggles to overcome racism and bigotry.

- » After years of effort, the first Islamic middle school (ages 11–15) was opened in Toulouse, in a new building with four classrooms, a gymnasium, a computer lab, a prayer room, and a 36-year-old director.
- » A university in Paris was offering the first online master’s degree program in Islamic and Arab studies.
- » A food company announced that it was launching the first nationwide television advertising campaign in France for *halal* meats.
- » Kenza Drider, a 32-year-old woman of Moroccan origin who lives in Avignon, announced her intention to run in 2012 for the office of president of France. Shocked by the law banning garments covering the face, she called for the law to be rescinded “in the name of *liberté* and freedom of conscience.” Drider called for bringing France before the European Court of Human Rights.
- » To the sound of *La Marseillaise* beneath the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the Muslim Scouts of France ended a Tour of France carrying a Flame of Hope. The Scouts and another youth group of secular Muslims, Mosaic, then launched a white paper to promote political awareness among young people.
- » A French production of Adelheid Roosen’s *The Veiled*

*Monologues*, a play depicting the lives and sexuality of 12 women in Muslim cultures, was about to open in Paris.

Unmentioned were the hand grenade in Cité Félix-Pyat or the AK 47s of Marseille.

There was a constructive message to deliver.

The integration of Europe's diverse Muslim communities and other minority groups is a priority for the Open Society Foundations. Our At Home in Europe Project examines government policies and practices on inclusion and advocates for reforms that promote diversity and equality. The project's reports on Muslims in 11 European cities focus on participation and citizenship, education, employment, housing, health, media, and the criminal justice system. In addition to minority inclusion, the Open Society Foundations work in over 80 countries to advance rights and justice, health, education and youth, governance and accountability, and media and information. We seek to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens.

At Home in Europe Project  
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