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## **Muslim leader urges Macron not to meddle too much in French Islam**

By Julie Carriat

Reuters (14.02.2018) - <http://reut.rs/2EI6vnu> - A leading representative of French Muslims urged Emmanuel Macron not to meddle in the organization of France's second-largest religion, days after the president said he would try to redefine relations between Islam and the state.

The rebuke came from the leader of an organization set up 15 years ago in a bid to defuse concern about radical preachers and foster a more homegrown form of Islam that would fit better with France's traditional separation of church and state affairs.

"Everyone must stick to their role," Ahmet Ogras, president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM), told Reuters in an interview.

"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, a Frenchman of Turkish descent who has led the CFCM since mid-2017.

Macron, elected last May after a runoff victory over far-right leader Marine Le Pen, said in a Feb. 11 newspaper interview he planned to revisit the way Islam was overseen.

"What I'd like to get done in the first half of 2018 is set down markers on the entire way in which Islam is organized in France," he told the Journal du Dimanche. The priority would be to "bring back what secularism is all about".

Traditionally Catholic France is home to the largest Jewish and Muslim communities in Europe, with the latter estimated at five million out of a population of 67 million.

The official rule is strict separation between religion and state, with the former considered a strictly private matter. The rule that has been used to justify bans on the wearing of Muslim veils by public service employees as well as any wearing of fully concealing head-to-toe veils in public places.

Macron has been under pressure to deal firmly with radical preachers and mosques since a wave of attacks in which Islamist militants killed more than 230 people in France since 2015.

Emergency search-and-arrest powers introduced in the wake of the November 2015 attacks that killed 130 people in Paris have since been made permanent under tougher security legislation. Several mosques have been shut and imams expelled.

Macron's declarations in the Feb. 11 newspaper interview suggest he is considering a profound reorganization of the way in which the Islam faith is funded and its preachers schooled.

Back in 2003, Nicolas Sarkozy, interior minister at the time and president from 2007 to 2012, engineered an agreement among the country's main Islamic groups to create the CFCM.

The idea was to have a council to speak for Muslims similar to the way the French Bishops' Conference speaks for Catholics or the Consistory speaks for Jews.

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## **Morocco leads foreign funding for French mosques**

***Morocco is the largest donor for the construction and maintenance of mosques in France, according to a report released by the French Senate based on figures provided by the French Ministry of the Interior.***

By Sana Elouazi

Morocco World News (12.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2CkS8QG> - The report finds that between 2011 and 2016, the Moroccan government allocated EUR 6 million, including wages to imams, to help finance mosques in France, where the secularism forbids the state from funding the establishment of any places of worship, according to a French law issued in 1905.

Morocco ranks just ahead of Saudi Arabia—whose financing is estimated at about EUR 3.8 million—and Algeria, whose contribution amounted to some EUR 2 million.

These foreign investments represent only about 20 percent of financing for mosques in France, the remaining 80 percent came from the French Muslim community.

Whereas private donations from members of France's Muslim community fund the majority of small mosques, big mosques are usually funded by other Muslim states especially Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Turkey.

The report states that there are about 2,450 mosques in France, mainly located in major cities. Sixty-four percent of these mosques are less than 150 square meters.

### ***Islam, 2nd largest religion in France***

The report notes that there are between 3 and 6 million Muslims in France, among whom almost 2 million are practicing; this figure makes Islam the second largest religion in France.

A just-released opinion survey by Institut Français d'Opinion Publique (IFOP) reveals that 56 percent of French people believe that Islam is compatible with the values of their country, while 43 percent believe the opposite.

This indicator that illustrates that the integration of French Muslims within France is still a work in progress.

On the other hand, this same survey reveals that 70 percent of the population would not be in favor of creating a tax on halal products whose revenues would be used to finance French Muslim organisations.

In an interview with the French weekly newspaper Le Journal Du Dimanche (JDD), president Emmanuel Macron said that he will lay the foundations for the organization of Islam in France in the first half of this year.

"We are working on structuring Islam in France and also on how to explain it," said Macron.

He added that his objective is to "find the heart of secularism, the possibility of being able to believe as not to believe in order to preserve national cohesion and the possibility of having free consciences."

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## **Hate crime charges dropped in Paris trial of Muslim accused of killing Jewish neighbor**

JTA.org (01.02.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2E47Vte> - A judge in Paris scrapped hate crime charges from the indictment of a murder suspect who confessed to killing his Jewish neighbor.

The move came amid a rise in reported violent anti-Semitic attacks in France.

The Paris Prosecutor's office said it would appeal the dismissal Monday of the aggravated element of a hate crime in the trial of Kobili Traore, a 28-year-old Muslim man who on April 4 threw his neighbor, Sarah Halimi, to her death from the window of her third-story apartment.

The charge of murder aggravated by racial hatred was excluded from what is now the indictment against Traore by the examining magistrate — a function designed to oversee prosecutors and intercept flawed indictments before they form the basis of an active trial.

Francis Kalifat, president of the Jewish umbrella group CRIF, told Le Parisien daily that the examining magistrate's move was "an insult" to Halimi's memory.

Separately, the Interior Ministry of France on Wednesday reported a 7.2 percent decrease in 2017 in the number of anti-Semitic attacks in the country over 2016. The ministry recorded 311 cases. But of those, 97 were classified as violent assaults – a 25 percent increase over 2016, Le Figaro reported.

The SPCJ watchdog unit of French Jewry, which receives and collects reports independently to the Interior Ministry, has not yet published its report for 2017.

In the Halimi case, Traore was heard shouting about Allah and calling her "a devil" in Arabic. Halimi's daughter said he had called the daughter a "dirty Jewess" in the building two years before the murder. But the examining magistrate in Traore's trial, which opened this week, dismissed the aggravated hate crime charge before the trial actually began, Le Parisien reported Wednesday. Traore is pleading temporary insanity, though he has no history of mental illness.

For months after the slaying of the 66-year-old Jewish physician, leaders of French Jewry urged authorities to include the aggravated element of a hate crime in the draft indictment against Traore. They finally agreed in September.

The incident occurred months before France's general election, in which the French political establishment was bracing for unprecedented gains for the far-right National Front party.

Marine Le Pen, the anti-immigration party's leader, received a historic third of the vote in the final round of the presidential elections, which she lost to the centrist candidate, Emmanuel Macron.

Many French Jews believe authorities and the media covered up or ignored the alleged anti-Semitic elements connected to Halimi's suspected murder to prevent it from becoming fodder for Le Pen's divisive campaign.

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## **Laïcité and religious freedom: A coalition of NGOs questions France at the United Nations**

CAP/ LC HRWF (15.01.2018) - In a side-event following the Universal Periodic Review of France in Geneva this Monday 15th January, several NGOs and an international law expert have called upon President Emmanuel Macron and his Prime Minister to revise the financing of FECRIS (European Federation of Centers of Research and Information on Cults and Sects) and its member organizations. Under the predecessors of President Macron, FECRIS has benefitted from abusive grants that they have used to disseminate hate speech targeting some minority religious groups in the countries of the European Union and beyond.

The representative of the French NGO **CAP/LC (Coordination des Associations et des Individus pour la Liberté de Conscience)**, **Mr. Thierry Valle**, highlighted the French policy stigmatizing religious minorities and the human consequences which are often dramatic for the members of these minorities. By financing FECRIS, France contributes to the expansion of this phenomenon in Europe.

On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, France has to reconsider its policy about religious minorities, he added.

**Attorney Patricia Duval**, an international law expert, drew attention to the ideological roots of FECRIS.

FECRIS is a French legal association that was created by UNADFI (a French anti-sect organization) in 1994. Its objective is to bring together anti-sect groups across Europe which claim to defend families and individuals against 'harmless sectarian organizations' and to represent them in the EU institutions. Although this goal may look laudable, a deep analysis reveals that FECRIS member associations in France

- call sects any religious minority or spiritual movement the beliefs of which are described by FECRIS as deviant from what is "usually considered a religion",
- view the conversion to such beliefs as a psychological subjection, a 'capture of souls' and a violation of human dignity;
- collect testimonies of families or parents of converts to new religious movements who disagree with their choice to accuse such groups of destroying families,
- compile data based on rumors, prejudices and suspicion that they use to stigmatize the concerned groups,
- have continuously received funding from various French public powers that they use to carry out an ideological crusade.

The lawyer concluded that it was urgent for France to stop sponsoring this sort of activities and indicated that the United Nations Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, after her visit to France on 18 to 29 September 2005 also made specific recommendations in this sense.

Her report of 6 March 2006 provided:

112. The Special Rapporteur urges the Government to ensure that its mechanisms for dealing with these religious groups or communities of belief deliver a message based on tolerance, freedom of religion or belief and on the principle that no one can be judged for his actions other than through the appropriate judicial channels.

113. Moreover, she recommends that the Government monitor more closely preventive actions and campaigns that are conducted throughout the country by private initiatives or **Government-sponsored organizations**, in particular within the school system in order to avoid children of members of these groups being negatively affected. [emphasis added]

114. She urges judicial and conflict resolution mechanisms to no longer refer to, or use, the list published by Parliament in 1996.

The representative of **Human Rights Without Frontiers (Brussels), Mr. Willy Fautré**, denounced the dangerous liaisons between the (Russian) vice-president of FECRIS, Alexander Dvorkin, and the most radical circles of the Russian Orthodox Church. Whilst France, a secular country, finances FECRIS, its branch in Russia heavily persecutes non-Orthodox religions and carries out missionary activities aiming at bringing 'back home' Orthodox people who converted to other religions.

FECRIS member association in Russia hereby implements Vladimir Putin's ultranationalist policy which under the guise of "spiritual security" aims at eradicating any religion of foreign origin from the "Russian Orthodox Lands". The ban of Jehovah's Witnesses and peaceful apolitical Muslim movements as well as the imprisonment of several Scientologists are part of this religious purification strategy.

Alexander Dvorkin, in Russia, enjoys disseminating inflammatory narratives and hate speech about Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Baptists, Adventists, the Salvation Army, Mormons, Falun Gong practitioners and even Hindus. Last year, in the capital city of India, Hindus have held a demonstration outside the Russian embassy to protest against the persecution of their religion and burnt an effigy of Dvorkin.

The representative of the **European Interreligious Forum for Religious Freedom (EIFRF), Mr Eric Roux**, declared: "When a country like France adopts a specific but controversial policy, other countries in the world may think that it is therefore legitimate to follow suit and they usually do worse.

By financing groups like FECRIS, France sends the following message to the rest of the world: 'You can discriminate and persecute religious minorities because it is what we, the cradle of human rights, do'.

Under its newly elected government which seems willing to reform society by focusing on real priorities, France should stop financing and supporting such associations

France should apply its principles of laïcité and human rights, protect religious freedom for all, and particularly members of religious minorities.

Version in French of this press release: <http://www.coordiap.com/press3061-Laicite-et-liberte-religieuse-Une-coalition-d-ONGs-interpelle-la-France-a-l-ONU.htm>

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