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## **FRANCE: A controversial “religious profiling” of Muslim students in schools**

**FRANCE: Sonia Backès caught red-handed: a “religious profiling” of Muslim students in schools**

*Police and intelligence services asked principals to identify how many pupils were absent from schools on the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr*

by Massimo Introvigne

Bitter Winter (25.05.2023) – «Separatism », i.e. living according to religious values different from the secular Republican ideology, has been proclaimed a crime in France. But what is separatism? If you are a Muslim in a French school, and are absent from the classroom on Eid al-Fitr, you are probably a “separatist.”

It is thus not surprising that the French police, claiming it had been asked to do so by the intelligence services and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, wrote to principals asking to report “on absences from school during the period on Ramadan and particularly on the Eid day, April 21.”

Some principals, who obviously had not understood the French paranoid fear of “separatism,” believed they had been targeted by a practical joke. However, they contacted the police and learned that the request was deadly serious. They also learned that within the police there is a cell “police-security-school” taking its instruction from “the intelligence services.” They were asked to answer as soon as possible. It was later confirmed that the survey was national rather than merely local.

Similar request about “suspicious” active Muslim students in public schools are common in Xinjiang. France, however, is not China, and some principals refused to answer. Instead, in the Hérault department, whose main city is Montpellier, and in Toulouse, they contacted the media and their trade unions. In Toulouse, the local newspaper “La Dépêche du Midi” denounced the “religious profiling.” Trade unions instructed the principals not to answer, regarding the request as discriminatory and illegal.

“Le Monde” later connected the initiative to an old “friend” of Bitter Winter, French State Secretary for Citizenship Sonia Backès, a fanatical opponent of “separatism” practiced by both

Muslims and the so-called “cults.” Backès admitted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked principals for the percentage of pupils absent on Eid, but said it was not a “profiling” but rather a “study,” as names were not collected, only numbers.

The anti-racist NGO SOS Racisme called the initiative “very much shocking, as it regards the Muslim religious practice as a question of security.” The NGO also saw a “guilty casualness” in Backès’ statement.

The Union of French Mosques is now “calling for a thorough investigation” of the incident.

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**Massimo Introvigne** (born June 14, 1955 in Rome) is an Italian sociologist of religions. He is the founder and managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), an international network of scholars who study new religious movements. Introvigne is the author of some 70 books and more than 100 articles in the field of sociology of religion. He was the main author of the *Enciclopedia delle religioni in Italia* (Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy). He is a member of the editorial board for the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* and of the executive board of University of California Press’ *Nova Religio*. From January 5 to December 31, 2011, he has served as the “Representative on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination, with a special focus on discrimination against Christians and members of other religions” of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). From 2012 to 2015 he served as chairperson of the Observatory of Religious Liberty, instituted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in order to monitor problems of religious liberty on a worldwide scale.

Photo: Sonia Backès (credits) and Muslims celebrating Eid al-Fitr in France (from Twitter).

## Further reading about FORB in France on HRWF website

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