**A litmus test in France**

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President Emmanuel Macron faces a stern test in the wake of the latest terrorist attacks by radical Islamists. He has to tread carefully between protecting the French way of life and discouraging a climate of fear, hatred, and persecution directed at French Muslims. It is a litmus test of ” liberty, equality, fraternity,” the inspiring values of the French Republic.

The values of the Republic were also fiercely tested during the Vichy Government, which collaborated with Nazi Germany during WW2. It was a grim period with the deportation and murder of thousands of French citizens, mostly Jews, in Hitler’s death camps.

Marshal Philippe Pétain, the head of Vichy France, replaced the original Republican values with the fascist ideals of “work, family, fatherland,”. He also sought to revoke much of the 1905 legislation that mandated French secularism, or laïcité.

The Vichy government allowed religious teaching in schools and even restored the nationalized property to the church. After the liberation of France, General Charles de Gaulle repealed the Vichy laws and declared France, in the constitution of 1946, to be an “indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic”.

While remaining resolute against terrorism, the state must take care to not single out just Muslims for reproach and reprisals, because terrorism and violence is a problem not restricted to Muslims alone.

Arguably, the sad events during WW2 affected the French way of life more than the modern threat from radical Islam. Despite Pétain’s flawed legacy, Macron offered a charitable opinion of the man, “Marshal Pétain was also a great soldier during World War I” despite “fatal choices during the Second World War… I pardon nothing, but I erase nothing of our history.”

Today, Macron isn’t facing fatal choices to pacify French public opinion that rightly wants decisive action against Islamic terrorism. Unlike the serious social, racial, and political rifts created in France during the Nazi occupation, French society is in little danger of falling apart because of the Islamist threat.

The reason is that a great majority of the around 6 million French Muslims, about 9% of the total population, are born in France, have integrated, and accept secularism. Like other citizens, most French Muslims seek social and economic advancement.

Undoubtedly, it is a matter of concern for the government that a growing minority of Muslims are influenced by a totalitarian and anti-Western version of Islam. The government also points to an IFOP poll, which suggests that a large percentage of Muslims under 25 put their faith ahead of the French Republic. However, despite these trends, the threat of Muslim separatism in France highlighted by Macron seems overblown.

Still, France faces real differences in world-view, which it would be better off acknowledging rather than pretend they don’t exist. One major problem is that French secularism and Islamic doctrine are two very opposing and irreconcilable ways of seeing the world. The concept of a “religion-free” society envisioned by French secularism is anathema for most Muslims.

The French desire to see religion as discreet and personal, confined to the home or place of worship, is contrary to the experience of immigrants and refugees entering the country. For newcomers, state neutrality regarding religion is an alien concept, as in the autocratic countries they are coming from, Islam has an outsized role in public life.

It doesn’t help either that immigrants and refugees come from countries where liberal democracy and free speech don’t exist. Radicals in these countries thrive on religious fervor and strongly disapprove of self-expression and intellectual freedom. They brand people with opposing views as “apostates” and “enemies” of Islam.

Hardening the divide is the fact that Muslims newly arrived in France have to deal with a confusing culture shock. Compared to their countries of origin, France does have institutions that promote democracy, human rights, and justice.

That said, most immigrants move to France to seek a better life. They want to avail of economic opportunities and jobs and want the chance to experience freedom, democracy, and women’s rights. Therefore, helping new Muslim immigrants to adapt to the spirit of “liberty, equality, fraternity,” can’t be an impossible task.

Increasingly important going forward is that Macron should avoid measures that further polarize society along religious and racial lines. Without compromising on French values, the government should reinforce democratic values and inclusive institutions and address social and economic inequalities.

While remaining resolute against terrorism, the state must take care to not single out just Muslims for reproach and reprisals, because terrorism and violence is a problem not restricted to Muslims alone.

On their part, French Muslims can help Macron by shunning segregation and enmity and embrace education and enlightenment. Bridging social and cultural gaps is the responsibility of all citizens, regardless of religion and race. Social cohesion, integration, and tolerance are the best defense against radicalism.

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