

Un Coup de bluff: French Migration and Integration Policies under Macron's Presidency

Introduction

Emmanuel Macron accessed power in May 2017 as a centrist president, supported by his movement *La République en marche!*, a centrist political party, which formed the government. Both Macron and his party emerged quickly and abruptly, in the course of 2016, out of the crisis of the French Socialist Party, and its difficulty to compete in the French Presidential elections of May 2017. Macron was a new face¹ of the old socialist-liberal synthesis within the Socialist Party, even though more liberal than socialist. He claimed the need to incarnate a converging voice, that reconciles not only the liberal and the leftist wings within this party, but aspires to reach out to the liberal *Republicans*. Above all, Macron displayed an attitude of an astute political communicator, a quality François Hollande, his predecessor, severely lacked.

On migration, Macron and *La République en marche!* adopted a synthesis of the positions of the two major parties (the Socialists and the Republicans), promoting a prudent migration policy (enforcing border control) but remaining open to receiving refugees and migrants, within the boundaries set by France. Thus, the *République en marche!* appropriated some of the right-wing slogans while at the same time stayed faithful to the socialist-liberal traditional approach. This party used the mainstream media, Internet, and an aggressive communication policy, putting emphasis on mobilising the youth, which was afraid of a victory of the *National Front*, and mistrusted the two traditional parties (the Republicans and the Socialist Party). Thus, *La République en marche!* gave the illusion of a revolution and novelty.² This communicative strategy manipulated the public opinion into optimism and hope which, however, vanished quickly after the first year of the Macron era.

Observers have since noted that Macron's policies, including his migration policy, could be a mere *coup de bluff* designed to allow an even more neoliberal turn in France,

¹ Between 2012 and 2016, Emmanuel Macron has been deputy Secretary General to the President François Hollande and Minister of the Economy, Industry and Digital Affairs in the government of Manuel Valls, displaying liberal tendencies.

² Diane Delaurens, "En marche, la politique moderne ? ", *Esprit* 4 (2018):11-17.

attempting to revive French economy, society and politics. Writing for *Foreign Affairs*, Ronald Tiersky spoke of Macron as a pragmatist, taking distance when necessary from Merkel's policy on migration.³ And Philippe Askenazy drew attention, in *Dissent*, to the contradictions of Macronism, in what pertains to the so-called progressive neoliberalism.⁴

This paper describes and assesses the main features of Macron's migration and integration policy since May 2017, focussing in particular on the adopted new law of asylum and immigration, the president's dealings with Islam, his migration policy at an EU level, and his attitude towards NGOs.

1. Make it quick: The New Asylum and Immigration Law

Contrary to Merkel's Germany, both in Sarkozy's (2007-2012) and Hollande's presidencies (2012-2017) France maintained restrictive migration policies. In July 2017, Macron confirmed that he would not change France's migration policy. He refused to yield to European pressure, "reiterating an "unconditional" support for the right of asylum, without hosting a "controlled centre" to sort out migrants rescued in the Mediterranean, to relieve pressure on Italy and Greece".⁵

This firm position was echoed in the New Asylum and Immigration Law adopted on 1 August 2018. In spite of a controversy around this law, it made very little changes to the previous law, and could be considered as "focused on firmness".⁶ It aims at a better control of illegal migration, while it is more flexible about the procedure of asylum application, and making the procedure of naturalization quicker in order to accelerate integration into the labour market. It is typical of Macron's policy, at the center between right and left, while actually facilitating a "progressive neoliberalism": migration or refugees obtain better opportunities through taking the jobs available for them. On the other hand, the law allows expelling non-needed illegal migrants quickly.

This law n°2018-778 of 10 September, 2018 is entitled "for a controlled immigration, an effective right of asylum and a successful integration". It offers refugees a residence card for a maximum duration of four years (instead of 1 year) (Article 1). Article 41 makes easier the

³ Ronald Tiersky, "Macron's World: How the New President is Remaking France", *Foreign Affairs* 97 (2017):93.

⁴ Philippe Askenazy, "The Contradictions of Macronism", *Dissent* 65, 1 (2018): 90.

⁵ Migration : la France reste sur une ligne intransigeante
https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/07/11/migration-la-france-reste-sur-une-ligne-intransigeante_5329736_3210.html (last accessed 28-09-2018)

⁶ La loi immigration, votée définitivement, reste tournée vers la fermeté
<https://www.la-croix.com/France/Politique/loi-immigration-votee-definitivement-reste-tournee-vers-fermete-2018-08-01-1200959060> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

conditions of stay of highly skilled workers, foreign students or researchers extending their stay for purposes of job search or business creation. Article 36 states that “any foreigner who evades or attempts to evade the execution of a refusal of entry into France, an administrative prohibition of the territory, an expulsion order, a deportation order or an obligation to leave the French territory is punishable by three-year imprisonment”.⁷

The controversy that accompanied the law lacked substance. The right claimed that the text “does not respond to the seriousness of the current migratory challenge situation” while the left denounced the “billboard” and “repressive” text that violates the rights of those seeking asylum”.⁸

The loudest criticism of the law, albeit insignificant, came from leftist intellectuals (with whom Macron has little affinity). One of them, Vincent Geisser, a sociologist close to Islamist circles, said about the law that it illustrated cynicism. As he puts it:

„It is true that in its content as in its argument, the new law on asylum and immigration is in total continuity with the securitized humanism of previous governments... this apparent cynicism of the French rulers on asylum and immigration issues does not depend exclusively on the "double discourse" register, well known to political communication specialists; it is also based on a deep belief and on an ideological vision of the migratory question: the "humanitaro-security" combination is now established as a hegemonic reading grid for "social problems" and, beyond that, as a reference for public policies on immigration.”⁹

What Geisser fails to mention, and in this he represents a typical leftist attitude, is that Macron and his law promote a “controlled migration”, the one that can nurture a neoliberal economy with the needed and cheap workforce, while expelling those unneeded, and establishing a sovereign right to protect France from illegal migration. Thus, it is not humanitarian in any sense, but rather a market-oriented and restrictive policy.

2. Dealing with Islam

⁷ JORF n°0209 du 11 septembre 2018 texte n° 1, LOI n° 2018-778 du 10 septembre 2018 pour une immigration maîtrisée, un droit d'asile effectif et une intégration réussie, NOR: INTX1801788L <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/loi/2018/9/10/INTX1801788L/jo/texte> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

⁸ La loi asile et immigration définitivement adoptée à l'Assemblée https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2018/08/01/la-loi-asile-et-immigration-definitivement-adoptee-a-l-assemblee_5338430_823448.html (last accessed 28-09-2018)

⁹ Vincent Geisser, "Projet de loi sur l'asile et l'immigration : indignation morale versus cynisme gouvernemental ?", *Migrations Société* 171, 1 (2018) : 6-7.

Another significant aspect of Macron's migration and integration policy is his will to reform and control Islam in France. This is a lot bigger of a challenge, compared to the law on migration, as it concerns six million Muslims, if not more, who live in France.¹⁰

2. 1 A plan to control Islam in France

Rather than changing structures or actors of Islam in France, Macron maintains the same ones, with a more inclusive communication strategy. France, marked by its republicanism, its secularism and its history of colonization, has made the choice to centralize Islam by creating institutions that bring together, as much as possible, different Islamic currents within an organization, which then becomes the privileged interlocutor of the French state. In 2003, Nicolas Sarkozy created the *French Council of the Muslim Faith* (CFCM). The CFCM has been the main actor in the representation of Muslim worship and mosques, as well as in the regulation of the *halal* market and Muslim chaplaincy. In 2018, President Emmanuel Macron launched a project to reform Islam in France to reduce the influence that the countries of origin could exercise on it.¹¹

Like the two previous presidents, Macron trusts in the CFCM. He illustrated once again his communication skills, having a dinner with the leaders of the CFCM during Ramadan in June 2017, and giving a speech at the same occasion. Therein, Macron did not criticise the representatives of Islam in France, but instead expressed his gratefulness for these representatives who called to vote for him early in the elections of May 2017. Moreover, he briefly restated his two priorities of the reform of Islam in France: training the imams locally and banning foreign funding of Islamic mosques and associations.¹²

A year later, the French government announced the launch of a national consultation led by "territorial foundations", which involve the "actors of the field" in order to improve the representation of Islam in France, the financing of its places of worship and the training of the imams and chaplains".¹³ This consultation is meant to help Macron make propositions of reform.

¹⁰ Islam de France: une concertation, des questions et des frictions
http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/islam-de-france-une-concertation-des-questions-et-des-frictions-27-06-2018-2230876_23.php (last accessed 28-09-2018)

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² Au dîner du CFCM, Macron expose sa feuille de route sur l'islam en France
https://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/06/21/au-diner-du-cfcm-macron-expose-sa-feuille-de-route-sur-l-islam-en-france_1578414 (last accessed 28-09-2018)

¹³ Islam de France: une concertation, des questions et des frictions

Nonetheless, the main weakness with this policy of relying on the institutionalization of Islam is that institutionalization does not equal the organization of Islam and Muslims, let aside controlling them. Islam has other aspects than worship, such as political and social activities or itinerant preaching, which are highlighted by associations and organizations or even by charismatic individuals, who compete with those in charge of the cult, recognized by the CFCM. These actors, sometimes subversive or protesting, or simply autonomous, escape the authority of CFCM. Especially since some Muslim leaders, such as the ones at the powerful Union of Islamic Organizations of France (UOIF) close to the Muslim Brotherhood, even while participating in the CFCM, keep their structures parallel to the CFCM. As a result, the organizations represented in the CFCM, including the Grand Mosque of Paris and the associations of official Turkish Islam, continue their religious or political agendas outside the CFCM.

Turkish, Algerian and Moroccan embassies have the upper hand on the CFCM. They control Islam in France in negotiation and/or competition with the Muslim Brotherhood (UOIF). In the period of 2003-2017, the CFCM oscillated between Algerian and Moroccan control. Currently, the CFCM is led, since July 2017, by Ahmet Oğraş, an agent of the AKP of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, elected thanks to the support of the Turkish community and the Muslim Brotherhood in this institution.¹⁴

2.2 A Report for Macron: The Montaigne Institute's *The Fabric of Islamism* and the Islamisation of France

More bad news about the realities of Islam in France came in September 2018, as Macron's think tank, the Montaigne Institute, published its report entitled *The Fabric of Islamism*. For observers of Islam in France, it has been no secret that Islamism, whether state Islamism (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, etc.) or Islamist movements (the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, Tablighi Jamaat, etc.) are controlling most of the Islamic fields in France in terms of funds, mosques, associations, resources, imams, and discourses. However, no previous report has transferred what researchers and observers knew in an official report to the President of France, and not in the dramatic way the report describes the situation in France.

http://www.lepoint.fr/societe/islam-de-france-une-concertation-des-questions-et-des-frictions-27-06-2018-2230876_23.php. (last accessed 28-09-2018)

¹⁴ Ahmet Oğraş, un Franco-Turc proche de l'AKP, prend la tête du CFCM
<https://www.france24.com/fr/20170630-ahmet-ogras-cfcm-conseil-francais-culte-musulman-turquie-akp-erdogan-islam-france> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

Still, *The Fabric of Islamism* offers no new measures to solve the problem of Islamism and the Islamization of France. The report asks Macron to control the funding of Islam in France through the creation of an institution responsible for organizing and funding the Muslim faith (training and remuneration of imams, construction of places of worship, theological work and fight against Islamophobia and anti-Semitism).¹⁵ This institution is expected to “make up for the organizational weaknesses and conflicts of interest of the current bodies. Indeed, the preponderant place left to the countries of origin of Muslim families and the bad management of money related to *halal* trade, pilgrimage and individual donations prevent the emergence of an Islam managed in France by French according to the interests of the Muslims of France”.¹⁶

An umbrella organization which is both under the control of the state and sufficiently flexible to allow a wide representation of Muslim communities is unrealistic considering the principle of *laïcité*. While the question of funding and institutionalization are certainly crucial to the organization of Islam in France, they are detached, in the report, from their communitarian, ideological and political settings. No measures are suggested against Islamist movements, which move freely in transnational spaces between France and other countries, and run schools, sports clubs, associations and mosques. Moreover, agreements with states such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria and Turkey are not recalled here. Foreign funding might be important but not vital to the work of Islamist movements or for the internal dynamics of Muslim communities who rely, in the first place, on their own funding, through donations by the members of the community. In addition, transfer of money by small amounts is practiced for generations within these communities, by-passing any control.

From a political point of view, Macron’s advisers wish to offer him another opportunity of political communication without adventuring into a dangerous land. Instead of tackling parallel societies within the French society which would require a lot of resources and firm political decisions, the report suggests to address macro-logistics without indeed alienating the existent actors or structures. Certainly, Macron will not take a grip on Islam in France, risking the loss of Muslim votes for the next election, nor would he take seriously the problematic of integration for its considerable social cost, which is, anyhow, not a priority in his “progressive neo-liberalism”.

3. Macron’s Approach to the European Migration Policy

¹⁵ Institut Montaigne, *La fabrique de l’islamisme*, septembre 2018, p. 584.

¹⁶ *Idem*.

As of September 2018, Emmanuel Macron stands, in the EU's divide over migration, as a pragmatist pro-migration leader, whose "centrist position" proposes "to reach a compromise by taking in migrants boarded by NGOs and border guards in the Mediterranean, forcing the nearest country to land the migrants, and entrusting the Frontex agency with more resources to help Italy, Spain or Greece in these operations".¹⁷ On the other hand, migrants whose applications for the right of asylum are rejected, will be returned to their country of origin.¹⁸ Macron believes that if taking the migrants and the redistribution are done quickly, this solution would work. His plan is endorsed by the European Commission and some European countries such as Germany, Spain, Malta, Portugal, the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Greece and Luxembourg.

This plan does not contain any original element and the option of evicting migrants whose applications were rejected was always there, but for different reasons, returning migrants has been a failure. Taking in migrants boarded by NGOs is simply legalizing an illegal activity, namely human trafficking. The redistribution of migrants among EU countries has been also a failure and forcing the first country to land in migrants (mostly Italy) to come under pressure and suffer most of the burdens. This is a straw man's solution because it assumes that there are "welcoming countries", whose gates are totally open, and countries that refuse totally the right of asylum. No EU member endorses such a stance, not even Germany which is now in favour of tighter border control, and refuses to take mass waves of migrants. Macron's "controlled" migration policy is out-of-place and out-of-time and seems to be unfounded. He discards fractures, not only between the V4 and Italy on the one hand and France-Germany on the other, but also within some West European coalition governments such as Germany, Belgium, Austria and Denmark, where there are major reservations on Macron's plan.¹⁹

As the reception of Macron's plan does not meet the expected enthusiasm, he had recourse to threats for the opposing camp (V4 and Italy) during a press conference after the informal European Council meeting in Salzburg, Austria, on 20 September 2018, warning that

¹⁷ Immigration: ce que Macron va proposer aux chefs d'Etat européens
<https://www.lejdd.fr/international/immigration-ce-que-macron-va-proposer-aux-chefs-detat-europeens-3757610>
(last accessed 28-09-2018)

¹⁸ *Idem.*

¹⁹ Est-Ouest: à Salzburg, l'UE des blocs
https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/09/20/est-ouest-a-salzburg-l-ue-des-blocs_1680182(last accessed 28-09-2018)

“countries that are showing no solidarity will eventually have to leave Schengen and they will no longer benefit from financial aid (structural funds).”²⁰

4. Limits of Macron’s migration policy

4.1 Macron is not backed by public opinion

A recent survey found that 54% of the French people are opposed to welcoming migrants in France.²¹ So far, none of Macron’s arguments have convinced the French public opinion. Macron needs the latter for the forthcoming European parliamentary elections, which could be his first political defeat. Even more, his overall popularity stood at 28%, in September 2018, its lowest level since his elections in May 2017. In September, 70% of French people said they were “dissatisfied” with Macron’s performance, against 62% in July.²² Macron could pay an even bigger price in the coming months as his inflated rhetoric contrasts with poor economic results.

4.2 Macron’s “controlled centres” are unrealistic

Macron convinced the EU to establish migrant processing centres in the volunteering countries. However, for the time being, “no country has volunteered officially, Spain helping Italy on a case-by-case basis as ships arrive”²³. Such ideas discard the fact that existing asylum centres cause societal friction, are overpopulated and expensive to run. Besides, it would encourage more migrants to come.

4.3 Macron in Calais

Macron was firm on migration and NGOs at his visit to Calais, in January 2018, calling the NGOs to responsibility, accusing some of them of “encouraging these women and

²⁰ “Countries that are showing no solidarity will eventually have to leave Schengen and they will no longer benefit from financial aid (structural funds).”
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/uk-europe/news/europe-is-no-menu-a-la-carte-macron-tells-visegrad-four-and-salvini/> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

²¹ Sondage exclusif: après l'Aquarius, toujours 54% des Français opposés à l'accueil de migrants en France
<http://www.atlantico.fr/decryptage/sondage-exclusif-apres-aquarius-toujours-54-francais-opposes-accueil-migrants-en-france-ifop-jerome-fourquet-3482079.html> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

²² Macron perd 7 points de popularité à 28%, son niveau le plus bas
https://www.challenges.fr/politique/macron-perd-7-points-de-popularite-a-28_614811 (last accessed 28-09-2018)

²³ “Macron un an après #1 : ses réussites et ses échecs en Europe”, *Le Point*, no. 201807, 27 August 2018, p. 6.

men to stay in Calais, to settle illegally or even to smuggle across the border”.²⁴ Some important NGOs boycotted his visit, and the leftist wing has criticized him. Macron even announced that, at Calais, “we live here the incompetence, the inconsistencies of European policies”.²⁵ When it comes to French territory, Macron makes little concessions to NGOs, while he seems to accept their role in the European migration policy. This is contradictory, and could be explained by the fact that at an EU level, “burden sharing” makes others pay for the migration cost.

4.4 Macron in Africa

Macron has made Africa a priority in his foreign policy, visiting several countries in the course of one year, attempting to revive France’s African policy, with a rhetoric focussing on a new start of relationships with an emphasis put on business and culture. The market share of France in Africa decreased from 11% in 2003 to 5% in 2017, while China went from 3% in 2001 to 18% in 2017, although France is still a major actor in North and Western Africa in terms of security and politics, especially in the Sahel region.²⁶ Macron’s African policy consists in making Africa more profitable for France.²⁷ in terms of increasing the economic presence of France in Africa This could explain the pragmatism of Macron in welcoming migrant ships from Africa.

4.5 Macron in Libya

Contrary to Italy, Macron does not prioritize control of illegal migration in Libya and his political strategy relies on the Paris agreement which pushes for elections in Libya.²⁸ However, France’s quest for hegemony in Libya, attracted by the energy resources, is faced by rivalry with Italy, and American reservations, which are still the key-players in Libya, in

²⁴ Emmanuel Macron à Calais: un discours ferme sur l’immigration
<https://www.publicsenat.fr/article/politique/emmanuel-macron-a-calais-un-discours-ferme-sur-l-immigration-81483> (last accessed 28-09-2018)

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ Quelle est la politique africaine d’Emmanuel Macron ? <https://www.la-croix.com/Journal/Quelle-politique-africaine-dEmmanuel-Macron-2018-07-05-1100952623>(last accessed 28-09-2018)

²⁷ *Idem.*

²⁸ Les orientations diplomatiques d’Emmanuel Macron: « sécurité » en Europe et « crise humanitaire » en Syrie
https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2018/08/27/europe-syrie-libye-macron-devoile-sa-feuille-de-route-diplomatique_5346644_3210.html(last accessed 28-09-2018)

addition to different international actors who control militias in Libya. Macron's push for elections in December 2018 failed, amidst insecurity in Tripoli.²⁹

Conclusions

Macron's "controlled migration" is more restrictive in France as the New Asylum and Immigration Law strengthens France's sovereignty in accepting or expelling non-desired migrants. The law, however, makes little changes, does not respond appropriately to the current migration crisis and fails to satisfy Macron's leftist allies (let aside his right wing opponents). The French president wishes to control Islam in France and improve integration while remaining pragmatic, avoiding dissent. The measures he took unveil his limits; Islam is a transnational movement, with different actors and dynamics, which, once anchored firmly in a territory, cannot be "controlled" with half-measures. Macron's neo-liberalism which is open to globalization, and therefore to migration and Islam, relies on alliances and the benefit they generate in terms of elections and wealth for the French economic elites. As for Macron's approach to European policy on migration, while it claims to be cautious and pragmatic, it benefits, at the end of the day, the pro-migration camp. Macron's migration plan has no long term solution and allows France and Germany to save their faces, as both countries have major economic interests in Africa and the Middle East.

Beyond migration, Macron suffers from several weaknesses, with his popularity falling in France, his liberal policies which distance him from his leftist allies, and his embryonic African policy. Macron's "communicational-centrist neo-liberalism", that's what it is all about, wishes to produce the effect it had in France in generating a large support around his quick and eloquent political communication, benefiting from the crisis in the French system, offering a moderate alternative to Le Pen's far right. This effect vanishes in France and is unlikely to have a major effect on European politics. His inexperience, which can be seen in his warnings to the V4 countries and Italy, could produce tension in the coming months. In order to reproduce his coup in France, he needs a divided Europe, weak right and left wings, fear from nationalism and a new narrative for neo-liberalism.

²⁹ En Libye, la perspective d'élections en 2018 s'évanouit
https://www.pressafrik.com/En-Libye-la-perspective-d-elections-en-2018-s-evanouit_a189965.html