

# Policing the Perceived Threat: Securitization of the Muslim Population in France During 2004-2005

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## Abstract

The subject of this research is the policing activities in France during 2004-2005 towards its Muslim population and related public discourses. It will compare the statistics of judiciary police and administrative police provided by the French authority in order to study the relation between surveillance activities and criminality of the given population. It will point out that the preventative measures taken by the administrative police specifically towards the Muslim population are disproportionately high in comparison to the actual occurrences of terrorist actions committed by the group. Using the notion of securitization as an analytical tool, the paper will explain that the cohabitation with the Muslim population had been represented as an existential threat in France justifying severe measures disproportionate to the objective threat. It concludes that the acute vigilance surrounding the Muslims derives significantly from the raised "securityness" the French authority itself attributed to its Muslim population. The argument presented in this study adds an important perspective to the study of immigration. It shows how an escalation of securitization leads to heightened tension between the immigrants and the host society, actualizing the perceived threat by its own acts.

## Keywords

Security, securitization, immigration, ethnic profiling, France

The issue of immigration and integration is inseparable with the discourses over security. Previous studies have pointed out how immigrants are treated as an outsider within the state, and that its entity has often been regarded as a conflict to a collective identity and to a membership to a state (Sayad 1999; Benhabib 2004). Such conception tied to the presence of immigrants, has often fueled policy debates over protection of public order and preservation of domestic stability. It has been pointed out that such representation of immigration has often been used to justify the security policies which directly target the immigrants. Furthermore, studies have also argued that not only are these policies, an instrumental

reaction to an existential threat, these actions themselves affect the manner by which social reality is portrayed. In other words, the development of policies relating immigration and security itself renders migration as being a security problem.

The idea that state actors reconstruct certain issue as a security threat has been introduced by the Copenhagen school as a notion of securitization (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). In relation to

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immigration, the notion has been mostly typically used to understand the policies over border control (Bigo 1996; Ceyhan 1998). However, it is apparent in many states hosting a large immigrant population, that the entry of foreign nationals is not the only point at which immigration is argued in relation to security. It is not uncommon that delinquency is argued not only in relation to newcomers, but also in relation to the so-called second and third generation immigrants of whom many are by definition, country nationals. Such perspective on immigration and security has been argued in the context of police racism and ethnic profiling (Lévy 2010; Body-Gendrot 2004).

The subject of this research is the policing activities in France during 2004-2005 towards its Muslim population and related public discourses. It will use the statistics of the judiciary police and the administrative police provided by the French authority as its primary source. Using the notion of securitization as an analytical tool, this paper will conduct a qualitative analysis to study the relation between surveillance activity and the actual criminality of the given population. In order to support the results of the analysis, it will also take the media coverage of the urban riot of 2005 as an example of speech act.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how a notion of perceived threat could lead to a heightened tension between the host society and the immigrant population. It contributes to the extensive amount of literature on this topic by demonstrating a specific case in which one is able to identify a process of securitization through a use of speech act.

### **COMPARISON OF STATISTICS BY JUDICIARY POLICE AND BY ADMINISTRATIVE POLICE**

Table 1 shows the comparison of various statistics provided by the administrative police and by judiciary police related to arrests for terrorist actions. It is

notable that in the publications by the judiciary police, even in its anti-terrorist division, there is no particular mention of terrorist actions committed by Muslims or those who are motivated by radical Islamist ideas. The apprehensions made for violent actions of terrorist nature are primarily those committed by the separatist movements, most notably by the Corsicans. This accounts for over 90% of all arrests of this nature both in 2004 and 2005. We are not able to specify the number of any terrorist actions committed by Islamists, for unlike the Corsicans and the Basques, they were not mentioned specifically in its report as being a trend or forming a numerical significance. Though, it is apparent from the overwhelming proportion of the separatist movement that any other groups only make up a small percentage amongst those arrested for terrorist actions.

Nevertheless, when we turn to the statistics of the administrative police, there are strong authoritative actions taken specifically towards Muslims, such as deportation of imams or surveillance of prayer spaces. It is particularly noteworthy that nearly 30% of arrests in the name of prevention or in a definitive manner associated with terrorism-related charges were accused of having an “Islamist affiliation”. The comparison of the data reveals that the selected attention given to Muslims in the surveillance activities of the French is disproportionately high to the occurrences of terrorist actions committed by Muslims.

### **SECURITIZATION**

Securitization is a concept proposed by the Copenhagen school, which reconceptualizes the idea of security out of the narrow definition of the conventional approach, as well as to incorporate more extended fields of practice. Their concept of security differs from the traditional notion in two important ways. Firstly, in contrast to the traditional perspective, which understands security to be state-centered and

**Table 1.** Comparison of Arrests Made by Administrative Police and Judiciary Police

| Statistics by administrative police<br>(preventative action)  |           | Statistics by judiciary police                                    |                 |
|---|-----------|---|-----------------|
| Number of Imams expelled (2003-2005)  | 35        | Number of arrests for violent actions of terrorist nature (2004)  | 259             |
| Number of Imams in deportation process (2003-2005)  | 12        | Of which actions were committed by a separatist movement          | 215 (91%)       |
| Number of Muslim prayer spaces placed under surveillance (2004)   | 33        | Of which actions were committed by a Corsican separatist movement | 215 (90%)       |
| Number of "alleged Islamists" arrested in the name of prevention or in a definitive manner associated with terrorism-related charges (2004) | 103 (29%) | Of which actions were committed by Islamists                      | Unknown (0-17%) |
| c.f. Corsican terrorists arrested for the same charge   | 79 (22%)  |   |                 |
|   |           | Number of arrests for violent actions of terrorist nature (2005)  | 232             |
|   |           | Of which actions were committed by a separatist movement          | 211 (91%)       |
|   |           | Of which actions were committed by a Corsican separatist movement | 209 (90%)       |
|   |           | Of which actions were committed by Islamists                      | Unknown (0-1%)  |
|   |           | Terrorist organization named specifically                         | E.T.A.*         |

Notes: \* Basque separatist movement.

Sources: Le Monde, September 26, 2004; Le Monde, May 5, 2004; Le Monde, November 24, 2005; Police Nationale, Circonscription de Sécurité Publique, Gendarmerie Nationale, Compagnies de Gendarmerie. 2005. Criminalité et Délinquance Constatées en France.

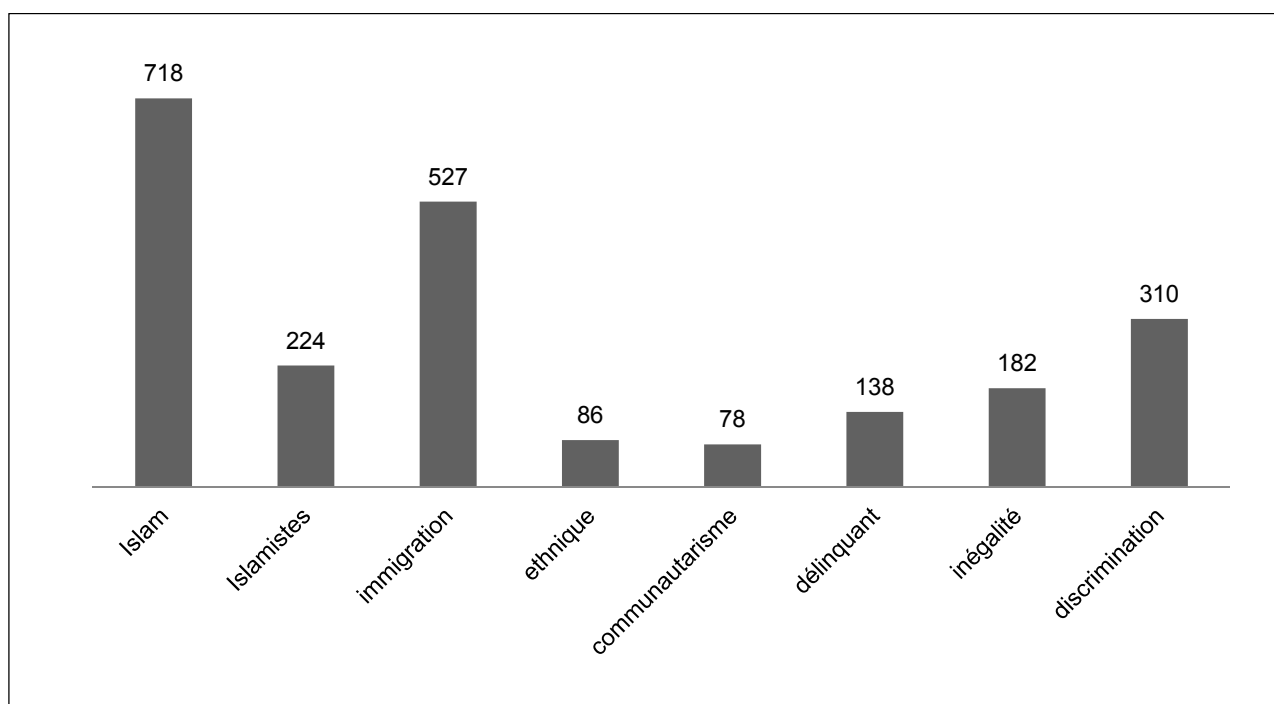
military-political in nature, the Copenhagen school emphasizes the need to study it within the multi-sectoral dynamics such as in societal, environmental, or economic realms. Secondly, the most significant point of this theory is the fact that it understands security not as an objective entity, but being intersubjective in essence. Thus, the line of inquiry moves from examining the plausibility of the threat, to questioning how an issue is depicted as a "security threat" (Buzan et al. 1998; Waever 1989; 1995).

By applying this framework, the aforementioned disproportion in the arrests and surveillance towards the Muslims can be understood as having resulted from the consolidation of a shared understanding that cohabitation with the Muslims represented a security threat to the well-being of the French citizens. In order to understand this phenomenon as an example of

securitization, it is important to understand the process by which the shared understanding was constructed in France that cohabitation with the Muslims was a threat against which severe policing action was to be taken. In the study of securitization, it is considered that by speech act, representation of a threat makes the utterance a social reality. The following section will take the example of 2005 riot as an example of speech act that has taken in part in the process of securitization.

## 2005 URBAN RIOT AS AN EXAMPLE OF SPEECH ACT

In 2005, a series of riots broke out in the Parisian suburbs and other provincial cities. The civil unrest was incited by the death of two youths of immigrant



**Figure 1.** The Occurrences of Terms Used in the National Press Reporting the 2005 Riot.

*Note:* Source: Tiberj 2008.

origin: Zyed Benna (17 years old), Bouna Traoré (15 years old) who died of electrocution as they ran into a power plant, trying to flee from the police. This provoked outrage and protests, mainly from the population that shares same background with the victims, the young French of immigrant origin living in the outskirts of the city. The riots continued for 21 nights (officially) during which 9,193 cars were set on fire and 2,921 people were arrested. On November 8, for the first time since the putsch of generals in Algiers in 1961, a state of emergency was declared in the metropolis. The unrest continued for nearly two months as the riot spread around the hexagon (the state of emergency ended on 4 January, 2006).

The author wishes to draw attention to the manner by which this incident was communicated to the French public. Figure 1 demonstrates the occurrences of different words used in the national press during the

21 days of the riot. The term “Islam” was used 718 times, “Islamist” 224 times, while “delinquent” was used a mere 138 times. The occurrence of the first two words put together was nearly seven times more than the latter. It is clear from the language used in the media coverage that this urban riot was depicted as having a strong connection to Islam and Islamism despite the fact that the objective of the protest was to demand social justice, and that its message was hardly related to religion. The public discourse surrounding the urban riot of 2005 demonstrates a clear example of a speech act through which a security concern is associated with a certain social group, staging their presence as a security threat.

## DISCUSSION

The case study of the urban riot of 2005 demonstrates an example of how Muslim citizens of France were

securitized through a speech act. The gravity of the security situation and the threat that this urban delinquency had posed to civil order are undoubted. However, the way in which it was communicated should be rigorously questioned. It is noteworthy that the Muslim religion is more strongly emphasized than the delinquent nature of the riot itself.

As it is pointed out by sociologist Vincent Tiberj, the situation in the banlieue was depicted “through the prism of Islam-immigration-integration”, at a remove from the actual intent of the protesters (Tiberj 2008). In other words, the civil riots were reprocessed through a speech act through which not only the unrest itself, but the religious body was defined as a threat to peace and order. This is a unique example insofar as it constitutes an applied case of securitization. Generally, speech act is recognized in context where a certain incident is elevated to a security issue by designating it as an existential threat. Though in this case, the incident itself was by all means justified as a security threat. What is peculiar is the fact that the speech act has been used to extend the scope in which security hazard is recognized. Islam has been reschemed to be integrated to the framework of security threat that was posed by the civil unrest. The participants of the riot mentioned very little of religion; rather their discontent lay in the social injustice they faced in the French society. Yet, “Islam” and “Islamist” were used five times more than “inequality”, three times more than “discrimination”.

This analysis of the speech act provides an important insight for the policing statistics presented in Section 2 (comparison of statistics by judiciary police and by administrative police) of this paper. The findings imply that the disproportionately high number of policing activities directed specifically at Muslims has resulted from securitization of Islam in France. The threat of Islamist activities was by no means absent in France. However, the heightened sense of vigilance and tension derives more from the

dramatization of the perceived threat rather than the existential threat posed by the Muslim religion and its adherents.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, policing statistics and public discourse were studied using securitization as an analytical framework. The result of the analysis demonstrates that in the period 2004-2005, there was a securitization of Islam in France resulting in the disproportionately high number of preventative actions taken by administrative police as a counter-terrorist measure.

The limitation of the study is in its scope. In future work, more case studies will be conducted to reinforce the analysis of speech act in order to validate the subject as an example of securitization. Furthermore, although the present study was a qualitative approach, a quantitative analysis through a text data mining of the public discourse would provide more depth and insight to the proposed argument.

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