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Constructing mosques : the governance of Islam in France and the Netherlands

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Citizenship, Islam and mosques in France

7.1. Introduction

In France colonial and early guest worker regimes institutionalised and legitimised unequal treatment, segregation and hierarchy between Muslim immigrants and the host society. When Muslims became permanent members of French society and acquired French citizenship these representations and practices had to be redefined. This chapter discusses the way successive French governments developed policy responses to accommodate the presence of Islam since the early 1980s. In most studies France is the negative example. Muslims are said to have encountered strong resistance with regard to their claims for recognition. Successive French governments are said to have been unwilling to accommodate Muslim religious practices and needs. In this chapter I describe the actual governing strategies and policy responses, focusing on the issue of mosque establishment with special emphasis given to public policy responses in Marseilles. My first goal was to see whether French policy responses had indeed been similar across time. A second goal was to see whether French national and municipal governments had thought of mosque building in specific ways and whether policy responses had differed at these administrative levels. A third goal was to explore possible (dis)continuities of governing strategies of the colonial and guest workers regime.

7.2. Cathedral Mosques

In 1981 the French Minister of the Interior and simultaneously the mayor of Marseilles, Gaston Defferre, said at some point in a visit to Algeria: “The Algerians who come to France do not intend to establish themselves definitively and melt [*se fondre*] into French society. They are migrant workers and not immigrants” (cited in Brubaker 1992: 142). The statement was an illustration of the lack of willingness to think about the integration of newcomers. At the same time, a variety of actors and institutions – employers, social workers, personnel and management of dormitories and social housing companies – had long acknowledged that most migrant workers constantly postponed the planned return home, that families were being formed and that immigrants settled in low-cost housing in concentrated areas of the cities that were being deeply transformed in the process. The overall orientation of institutional and policy responses was pragmatic (Grillo 1985; Favell 1998: 46ff.).

The early 1980s also were a period in which new forms of immigrant organisation developed. In October 1981 the 1901 law on associations had been modified and non-nationals had obtained the right to create civil associations. A well-known example was the *mouvement beur*, a movement that developed around protest marches by young North Africans. With their social demands concentrated around concerns about equal treatment, respect and solidarity these

forms of immigrant organisations were not unfamiliar to French political culture.²⁷¹ Political contestation about immigration and integration concentrated on issues such as tolerance and the need to fight discrimination and exclusion. Confronted with a rise of racist violence and the re-emergence of extreme right political movements, anti-racism became an important new rallying cause for progressive political forces in France.²⁷² The change of the law on civil associations had created opportunities for formation of immigrant social organisation on a religious basis as well. Mosque associations sought to legalize and further institutionalise their organisational structures.²⁷³

Islam not only became a public issue around demands raised by Muslim associations, it also emerged as a controversial issue in the newly emerging discussions on the integration of immigrants, in particular those from Northern Africa. One factor contributing to an increased focus on Islam was the political breakthrough of the Front National in the course of the 1980s, a period in which the party used Marseilles as a home base for its political campaigns.²⁷⁴ Political campaigns of the Front National in the 1980s spoke of the growing “Islamisation of French society” (Étienne 1989: 203ff.).

Social scientists had also begun to take more interest in Islam in France. A major research project was conducted between 1984 and 1987 in the Paris region and in Bouches-du-Rhône, the latter focussing foremost on the situation in Marseilles.²⁷⁵ Given the important role of intellectuals and academics in French public debate, the new “Islam experts” would soon start to play a major role in shaping ideas about Islam in France.²⁷⁶ Most of them were opposed to France embracing a form of multiculturalism. Terms such as “communalism” (*le communautarisme*) and the “tendency to fall back on ethnic ties” (*répli identitaire*) began to dominate academic and public discussions.²⁷⁷ Yet, researchers stressed that it would be wise to help Islam to further institutionalise itself in France, play down the influence of foreign governments and international organisations, and encourage Muslims to orient themselves more

271. Newcomers and immigrants had often been incorporated in France as a result of their own mobilization and in the interwar period the trade unions and the Communist Party had functioned as “integration machines” for the Italian and Spanish workers. See Ireland 1994; Noriel 1988; Geisser 1997; and Withol de Wenden and Leveau 2001.

272. Several anti-racist organisations were created in the mid 1980s, such as SOS-racisme and France Plus that were both founded in 1985. See Geisser 1997.

273. On the development Muslim organisations in France in the 1980s see Étienne 1984, 1989; Kepel 1991; and Cesari 1994.

274. In 1987, a year before the electoral breakthrough of the Front National, Le Pen held a speech in Marseilles in which he caricaturised the famous speech of general De Gaulle at the liberation of Paris: [“Marseilles disfigured, ruined, occupied! ... But Marseilles soon liberated ! Liberated from its enclaves which are today foreigners, but tomorrow they will be enemies ... Marseilles is ... the symbol of France which wants to express its will to be itself, its resistance to the decadence and to the foreign occupation”. [“Marseille défigurée, ruinée, occupée ! ... Mais Marseille bientôt libérée ! Libérée de ses enclaves aujourd’hui étrangères, demain ennemies... Marseille est ... le symbole de la France qui veut affirmer sa volonté d’être elle-même, sa résistance à l’occupation étrangère...”] (cited in Sayad et al. 1991: 176).

275. This pioneering research project led to an important number of publications on Islam in France in the late 1980s, notably those of Étienne 1984, 1989, 1990 (a volume on Islam in France edited by Étienne which was originally published in 1988); Leveau 1988; Kepel 1991 (first edition 1987); and Cesari 1994.

276. On the role of intellectuals in French public debate and policy discussions see Favell 1998 and Bowen 2006.

277. See Krieger-Krynicky 1988: 128-129; and Kepel 1991: 379ff.

within a French social context. The best way to incorporate Islam was via the development of an “Islam of France” (*un islam de France*) or a “French Islam” (*un islam français*). This French Islam was opposed to an Islam which was merely “in” but not “of” France (Étienne 1989: 201ff.).²⁷⁸

Compared to their European counterparts the successive French governments of the 1980s were slow in developing policies to deal with immigrant integration issues. The pragmatic orientation of policy efforts, guided by the notion of “immersion” (*insertion*), had, for a very brief period in the early 1980s, been coupled with ideas about anti-racism and immigrants’ right to cultural identity. In anti-racist organisations such as SOS-Racisme there was support for the idea that immigrants had a “right to be different” (*droit à la différence*).²⁷⁹ However, by the time French government would begin articulating more comprehensive views on immigrant integration and cultural diversity – in particular during the reform of the nationality code between 1986 and 1988 – issues of national integration and cultural diversity had become more complex and controversial. There was an ongoing discussion on the need to give more autonomy to some regions in France, enabling the populations in the Basque, Breton, Corsican and Provence regions to maintain their languages and culture. In the mid 1980s there was debate on a proposed reform of the education system that threatened to endanger the opportunities for private denominational schools to receive state support.²⁸⁰ Finally, the ongoing process of European economic and political integration was seen as a threat to French governing traditions (Favell 1998: 50ff.). These developments and political trends could easily be taken to mean that the French political model as a whole, with its emphasis on unitary government and national integration under leadership of the state, was under threat.

As Adrian Favell has demonstrated, in this particular context the republican tradition was reinvented and rearticulated as a comprehensive and uniquely French approach to handle immigrant integration issues (Favell 1998: 58ff.). The French model was presented as based on the full integration of individual immigrant newcomers via their participation in a neutral and secular public and political arena. In France, immigrants should emancipate and integrate as citizens and they should not create their own ethnic and religious institutions and organisations. The mainstream political Left and Right joined in the defence of “the French model”. It allowed the mainstream parties to intervene in debates on immigrant integration while distancing themselves from other European approaches, notably from “Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism”, and while drawing a clear boundary between their own positions and those of the Front National

278. For example, when Bruno Étienne was consulted by the Parliamentary Committee on the reform of nationality code in 1987, he suggested that a kind of French “Muslim Church” could be established at the image of the religious institutions that had been created under the Concordat, such as the French Protestant Federation and the French Israelite Consistory. See “Les auditions publiques de la commission de la nationalité présidée par Marceau Long – Audience de Bruno Étienne” September 18 1987.

279. In the mid 1970s there had been public support for the maintenance of immigrants’ religious and cultural practice and in the early 1980s mother-tongue teaching programs still existed that had been developed thinking that immigrants and their children should “retain their cultural patrimony” in view of the return home (Grillo 1985: 193). See also the policy report issued by the Ministry of Culture in 1982 entitled *Démocratie culturelle et droit à la différence*. Report for Jack Lang, Minister of Culture.

280. This Catholic-led opposition resulted in a protest march in favour of religious based education that brought more than 1 million people in the streets of Paris in 1985. See Baubérot 2004; and Bowen 2006.

that were portrayed as undemocratic, anti-Republican and xenophobic.²⁸¹ The articulation of immigrant integration policies developed in tandem with ideas about the need to encourage the emergence of an “Islam of France”.²⁸²

7.2.1. Mosques as a public issue in France in the 1980s and the need for a Cathedral Mosque in Marseilles

Now that the idea took root that Muslim immigrants were becoming a part of French society the existing spaces of worship increasingly seemed inadequate, both in the eyes of the Muslim believers and in the eyes of French society as a whole. About 800 prayer houses existed in France in 1985 but they were often too small and lodging was poor, unhygienic and sometimes even dangerous.²⁸³ To deal with this problem there had on some occasions been plans to construct new mosques.

One of the cities where such plans had emerged relatively early was Mantes-la-Jolie. In 1979 the mayor, Paul Picard, had defended the building of the mosque in an address to the members of the City Council. The new building would become illustrative of “the sense of responsibility and tolerance on the part of all Mantes-la-Jolie residents” and their willingness to

281. This reinvention of the French Republican tradition in terms of a model of immigrant integration was at first developed around the reform of the nationality code and in the report published by the Commission on Nationality that was entitled *Être français aujourd'hui et demain* (1988). Since 1988 governments of the Left further developed the French model. See for example the report of the Marchand commission *L'intégration des immigrés* (1990). In 1990 the High Council on Integration (*Haute Conseil à l'Intégration*) (HCI) was created. As Favell observes, three countries functioned as models of the antidote of the French Republican model: Germany with its *Völkish* conception of citizenship and organic view of the nation; the UK with its monarchical tradition, lack of constitution, liberal concept of civil society and laissez-faire governing tradition; and the United States as an example of a society characterised by socio-economic segregation, racism and ethnic breakdown (Favell 1998: 61). See also Brubaker 1992 and Feldblum 1999. French academic studies of the early 1990s that were important for the idea that a unique French model of integration existed included Schnapper 1992 and Todd 1994. For a discussion see also Joppke 1999.

282. In these early attempts to create Muslim institutions and representatives that could function as interlocutors for French authorities there was an important difference between the approach followed by the government of the Right and the Socialist government that came into power in 1988. Of crucial importance was the role of the Paris Mosque. Since 1982 the Algerian government had become increasingly involved in the organisation of Islam in France and staffed mosques in France with imams that were remunerated by the Algerian state. This development was welcomed by Charles Pasqua who was Minister of the Interior in Chirac's government (1986-1988) and who intended to work together with the governments of Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco to ensure that Islam in France would be shielded from fundamentalist influences (Kepel 1991: 381). Pasqua wanted the leaders of the Paris Mosque to become the privileged interlocutor for the French government and thought the institute could function as the main guarantee for the emergence of a moderate and liberal Islam in France (Kepel 1994: 266). However in 1988 a new Socialist Minister of the Interior appeared on the scene, Pierre Joxe, who had very different ideas about the ways to create an “Islam of France”. Joxe wanted to create French Muslim institutions that would function independently from the influence of governments of the countries of origin, notably those of Morocco, Tunisia and above all Algeria. In order to develop these kind of institutions the Minister invited six “personalities” in March 1989 to join in a “*mission de réflexion*” on the organisation of Islam in France. A year later, in March 1990, nine other personalities were invited to join in the so-called *Conseil de Réflexion sur l'islam en France* (CORIF) that should function as an interlocutor for the authorities. Even though the rector of the Paris Mosque was a prominent member of the CORIF, the new council aimed at weakening the influence of the Paris Mosque, and thereby of the Algerian government, on Islam in France (see Kepel 1994: 283ff.; Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 46ff.).

283. See for a discussion Étienne 1984; and Cesari 1994.

respect “the freedom to practice a faith and to found a place of worship” (De Galember 2005: 1153). Despite protests of neighbouring residents, the mosque of Mantes-la-Jolie was built on the outskirts of the city in 1981. It was the first newly built mosque in France since the colonial period and it had an 18-metre-high minaret.²⁸⁴ In 1987 another new mosque was built in Évry, one of the so-called “new cities” (*villes nouvelles*) that had been created to the south of Paris. This time the building costs were financed with a gift from the World Islamic League, supported by Saudi Arabia (Kepel 1991: 219).

In most French cities, public authorities, political parties and neighbouring residents took a far more hostile approach to the possible building of mosques. Fierce confrontations were recorded in the 1980s in cities such as Lille-Roubaix, Rennes, Romans-sur-Isère and Sevran (Kepel 1991: 294ff.). In the suburb of Charvieu-Chavagneux near Lyons, the Mayor even had a house of worship destroyed by a bulldozer in August 1989 after having refused the Muslim association the possibility of establishing a mosque elsewhere (Kepel 1994: 269).²⁸⁵

Thus by the mid-1980s the creation of mosques had become a political issue. There was the idea that there was an urgent need to create adequate prayer houses to guarantee Muslims’ right to religious freedom and also as a sign of tolerance of host society. There was the idea that enabling Muslims to construct more adequate and more beautiful mosques might be experienced as a form of recognition that would stimulate further integration and the development of an “Islam of France”. Finally, the fact that the construction of houses of worship could be financed by donors from Middle Eastern or North African countries was looked upon with suspicion.²⁸⁶

In Marseilles, North African and Muslim immigrants had not been allowed to establish themselves as one of the immigrant and religious communities.²⁸⁷ However, in the mid-1980s the idea arose of making space for a “Muslim community”.²⁸⁸ In 1986 Gaston Defferre who had been the mayor of Marseilles since 1953, died. During the funeral ceremony in the Cathedral *La Major* the representatives of all religious communities were to pay their respects to the late Minister of the Interior. Reportedly at the last minute someone thought of also inviting Mr. Abdelahi, imam of the mosque in rue Bon Pasteur. Thus during the ceremony the imam stood next to the Cardinal, the Grand Rabbi and the representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Maronite Church and the Protestant Church. Remembering the event three years later, the president of the mosque, Hadj Alili, observed: “The Mayor had to die to allow us to be recognised in the end”.²⁸⁹ Older immigrant communities had been able to integrate into the local society by creating their own community infrastructures and by being able to delegate a representative of the community to important public ceremonies. This possibility had been denied to the Muslim populations in Marseilles, but now, at the occasion of the funeral of Defferre, a representative of the Muslim community was present. The possible

284. See Kepel 1991: 287ff; and De Galember 2005.

285. This event has been cited countless times to serve as an illustration of the lack of willingness of French authorities to accommodate Muslim claims for recognition.

286. A report of the Parliamentary Commission on Immigration issued in 1990s had suggested to temporarily allow for the direct financing of the building of mosques by the state in order to facilitate the construction of mosques. No follow up was given to this suggestion. See Cesari 1994: 151.

287. See chapter 3 and 5.

288. See Temime 2004; Péraldi and Samson 2005.

289. [“Il a fallu la mort du maire pour que nous soyons enfin reconnus”] cited in *Le Monde* November 15 1989.

incorporation of the Muslim community into the “Marseilles model” soon became linked to the need for a central mosque in the city.

In October 1989, Robert Vigouroux, the new mayor of Marseilles, said in an interview in *Profession politique*, that he was in favour of the construction of a “real mosque of the dimension of a Cathedral or the one of Paris”.²⁹⁰ He added:

I want it to be beautiful. In the first place for the city. Moreover, such a mosque must be a symbol for the Muslims of Marseilles. A bit like the Cathedral is for the Christians. *Mosquées-hangars* are perhaps still necessary, but they are disgraceful. I want the people, the *Marseillais*, the tourists, the foreigners to go and see that mosque, and not only the Muslims. That it will be an object of curiosity.²⁹¹

The term “Cathedral Mosque” (*Mosquée Cathédrale*) was of an older date and could be used to refer to a mosque that was intentionally designed as such and therefore beautiful and typical. The expression was also used to translate the familiar distinction in Muslim countries between Main, City, Friday, Grand or Great Mosques and so-called neighbourhood mosques, the latter being houses of worship that serve primarily for the five daily prayers. In the specific context of France in the late 1980s however the expression carried additional significances. First, the expression “Cathedral” suggested something more than the concept “Great Mosque” and by borrowing from the Catholic tradition in which the Cathedral functions as the institutional centre of the diocese, it linked the building of a mosque to the issue of organising local Islam.²⁹² Second, by contrasting a real mosque that would be beautiful and large to the disgraceful “*mosquées-hangars*” it was made clear that the Cathedral Mosque should also be a symbol of recognition for the Muslims of Marseilles. Third, a beautiful mosque could also be visited by non-Muslims who might take interest in its architecture and in Islamic culture.

Even though the statement of the mayor of Marseilles thus made sense in the wider context of debates on Islam and mosques in France, it strangely enough did not necessarily make immediately sense in Marseilles. No local Muslim association was lobbying for a new central mosque. Some larger prayer halls existed, such as the mosques in Rue Bon Pasteur, at La Capelette (created in 1983), near the Flea Market (created in 1989) and on Boulevard National (created in 1983).²⁹³

290. Kepel writes that the first statement of Vigouroux in favour of a Great Mosque was dated on July 13 during the Sacrifice Feast, that is only three weeks following the declaration of Michel Noir (1994: 274). Falanga and Temin 1990 and Cesari 1994 mention September 1989.

291. [“Je désire qu’elle soit belle. D’abord pour la ville. Et puis une telle mosquée doit être un symbole pour les musulmans de Marseille. Un peu comme l’est une cathédrale pour les chrétiens. Les mosquées-hangars, c’est peut-être nécessaire mais c’est critiquable. Je veux que les gens, les Marseillais, les touristes, les étrangers aillent voir cette mosquée, et pas seulement les musulmans. Qu’elle soit un objet de curiosité.”] cited in *Profession Politique*, No 52, October 29 1989. The mayor had made a similar statement in a radio interview on France 3 in September that year.

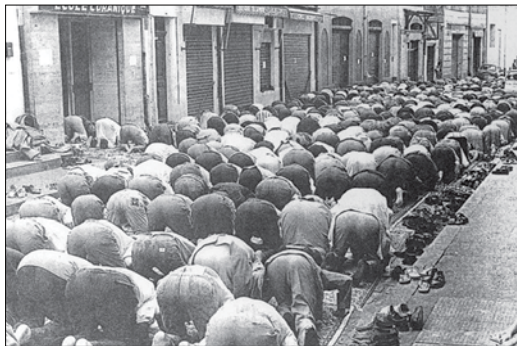
292. In Catholicism a Cathedral is the church of a bishop where the *Cathedra* is located; that is, the seat of the diocese and a symbol of episcopal authority (Ternisien 2004: 70).

293. In Marseilles these mosques are referred to by the name of the street or neighbourhood where they are located. The official names of these mosques are respectively: Al Nasr (Mosque at la Capelette), Al-Islah (Mosque near the Flea Market) and At Taqwa (Mosque at Rue Bon Pasteur).

Less than 10 days after the statements of the mayor, one of the wealthiest Algerian businessmen in Marseilles, Mustapha Slimani, the owner of a chain of slaughterhouses providing ritually prepared meat, presented a mosque-project.²⁹⁴ The project was named the Study Centre on Islamic Civilisations in Marseilles (*Centre d'études sur les civilisations Islamiques à Marseille*), and planned a multipurpose religious, commercial and cultural complex. The prayer hall itself would have a ground surface of 9,000 square meters, a flattened dome and minaret rising 50²⁹⁵ meters in the sky, and it would be able to cater between 15,000 to 17,000 worshippers. According to Slimani the mosque would provide for the religious needs of the immigrant population and those of the “Muslim French population”. The whole complex would also contain a media centre, a bathhouse, a parking lot, a cinema, a language school, a fountain, commercial centres, a restaurant, teahouses and facilities for the yearly Sacrifice Feast. It was to be established on a terrain of 12 hectares, located somewhere “sufficiently close to the centre of the city” but “nevertheless sufficiently distant to avoid certain polemics”.

Slimani had elaborated the project without consulting any of the chairmen of the existing Mosque Committees in Marseilles. However, Slimani was an important businessman and the consumers of his commercial goods were mainly North Africans who lived in Marseilles or who crossed the Mediterranean especially to purchase goods in the city. Because of its size and multiple purposes Slimani’s project for a Study Centre on Islamic Civilisations hardly seemed to correspond to the ideas and expectations of the representatives of Muslim associations. Unfortunately, however, in public discourse this project soon came to be seen as illustrative of the future Cathedral Mosque of Marseilles.

Between October 1989 and February 1990 a public polemic and debate took place in the local and national media. Two longer newspaper articles started off the discussion, one in the local *Le Méridional* on 18 October and one in the national Catholic newspaper *Le Soir* on 31 October. Both articles were illustrated with photographs of Muslim men worshipping outside in Rue Bon Pasteur, the narrow street that gave access to one of the entrances of the mosque near the Porte d’Aix.



Picture 7.1 Men worshipping in Rue Bon Pasteur, Marseilles 1989

294. This part is based on the descriptions and drawings of the project of Slimani included in the annex of the MA thesis of Oliver Falanga and Isabelle Temin (1990). The citations are from the description of the project.

295. According to Cesari the minaret would only be 18 meters high (1994: 116). However, the idea of plans for a minaret of 50 meters were mentioned in the newspaper articles in 1989.

These photographs supposedly spoke for themselves and showed that Muslims in Marseilles had to pray on the street. However, it was not only the lack of sufficient prayer space that was seen as a problem. Philippe Larue, a journalist of *Le Provençal* wrote: “thousands of believers are waiting for a decent mosque, and today they worship in basements or in spaces at the ground floor of the HLM public housing projects. This is an obstacle to a real integration and an image that the Muslims in Marseilles no longer want to show to the *regard de l’autre*”.²⁹⁶ A local architect suggested in addition that the new mosque could bring Muslims and non-Muslims together and it would also enable public authorities “to control the mosque, to place it within civil society”.²⁹⁷

Another way of arguing in favour of building a Great Mosque focused on its symbolic meaning and on local narratives and traditions. In this perspective the new mosque could contribute to the incorporation of Islam in Marseilles because the mosque would recognise Muslims as one of the religious communities in the city. This view of the need for a symbolic Central Mosque could garner the support of key spokesmen of the Muslim community and of representatives of other religious communities. Slimani’s multipurpose project, however, did not correspond to this idea of a Central Mosque. The president of the Mosque Committee at La Capelette, Bachir Dahmani, said that the Muslims of Marseilles had waited several years to establish “a real mosque” (*une véritable mosquée*) but underscored that it should “be nothing but a place of prayer and spirituality”.²⁹⁸ The president of the mosque in Rue Bon Pasteur, Hadj Alili, said that one “should not use the minaret to attract chicken salesmen” and insisted that the mosque should be a religious place and should not become a kind of “museum”.²⁹⁹

Protest

Despite the fact that it remained somewhat unclear whether a viable plan for a Great Mosque would be developed, the suggestion of the Mayor that he was in favour of it provoked resistance. Opponents found a forum in the conservative newspaper *Le Méridional*. A lead article on 17 November 1989 presented the results of a survey held by the journal in capitals on the front page: “Mosque: 57% NO, 40% YES”. The following day journalist Marc Alvarez wrote in a commentary:

Of course, behind this project for a mosque the problem of immigration can be seen with, as its corollary, that of integration (...) And although the majority of *Marseillais*, of course, recognises the right of Muslims to practice their religion, they are by contrast shocked to see the First Magistrate of the city take more interest in the establishment of a super Hollywood-like mosque, than in the patrimony of the city.³⁰⁰

296. [“une mosquée décente est attendue par des milliers de fidèles qui prient, aujourd’hui, dans des caves ou des locaux au rez-de-chaussée des HLM. Un obstacle à une réelle intégration et une image que les musulmans de Marseille ne veulent plus offrir aux regards de l’autre”]. See “L’ombre du minaret” in *Le Provençal* November 1 1989.

297. [“pour les pouvoirs publics de contrôler la mosquée, de la placer dans la vie civile”] in *Le Provençal* November 1 1989.

298. In *Le Provençal* November 4 1989.

299. “Ne pas utiliser le minaret pour attirer les marchands de poulets” in *Le Soir* 31 October 1989.

300. [“Bien évidemment, derrière ce projet d’une mosquée se profile le problème de l’immigration avec, en corollaire, celui de l’intégration... Et si, en grand nombre, les Marseillais reconnaissent naturellement le droit

The Front National and the residents associations in the Northern part of Marseilles – a possible location for the Cathedral Mosque – protested vehemently against the idea of building a mosque. In the various statements four arguments kept returning. First, the protesters insisted that the construction of a mosque in Marseilles should be talked about in relation to the “problems of immigration and integration”. More in particular what was at stake was the concentration of disadvantaged immigrant populations in the Northern districts (*les quartiers nord*). During a protest march against the new mosque that was organised on 18 November 1989, one of the banners read “Mr. Vigouroux don’t make a ghetto out of *Marseille Nord*”.³⁰¹ Slimani’s project was now being spoken of as an entire “Muslim city”.

Second, the protesting representatives of residents associations made use of the same kind of populist rhetoric that was deployed with great talent by the Front National. They argued that the vast majority of native residents – the *Marseillais de souche* – were opposed to this new project. In *Le Méridional* the mayor was said to be the “representative of the Muslim and non-Marseillais community”.³⁰² The newspaper spoke of “the mosque of Vigouroux” and portrayed the mayor as an intellectual who spent more time in Paris and abroad than in Marseilles.³⁰³ By contrast the Front National was willing to listen to the *Marseillais de souche* and did not think they were racists. The Front National called for a referendum to decide on whether or not a mosque should be built.³⁰⁴

Third, the critics argued that building a “super mosque” – a direct reference to Slimani’s project – was problematic because other religious symbols and buildings more truly represented the identity of Marseilles. The churches were the real “patrimony” of the city and the Mayor should be concerned about their upkeep. The idea of building a minaret rising 50 meters in the sky was, in the words of Front National municipal council member Daniel Domenech, “a provocation”.³⁰⁵ A cartoon was published in *Semaine Provence* in October 1989 (see picture 7.2).

On the left side of the cartoon rises the *Notre-Dame de la Garde* Basilica that was built between 1852 and 1880. It is a large church 162 meters high located on the hill overlooking the harbour. Together with football club Olympique Marseille and the *Vieux Port* the Basilica is one of the key symbols of the city. On the right side of the cartoon there is what appears to be a duplicate of the building, but the ornaments and the statue have been altered and have been substituted by a half moon and domes. The picture on the right represents the new mosque, which according to the Mayor was to be “like a Cathedral”. The subscript reads “While copying his drawing our cartoonist deliberately has made some mistakes. Can you find them?”. The cartoon figured alongside an article in which the Archbishop of Marseilles justified the construction of a real mosque in Marseilles by comparing the building of an Islamic house of worship to that of a

aux musulmans de pratiquer leur religion, ils sont choqués, en revanche, de voir le Premier magistrat de la ville s’intéresser davantage à l’édification d’une super-mosquée hollywoodienne qu’au patrimoine de la ville”. Marc Alvarez in *Le Méridional* 18 November 1989.

301. [“la capacité d’accueil de nos quartiers a déjà atteint le niveau de saturation”] and [“Mr. Vigouroux ne faites pas de Marseille Nord un ghetto”] in *Le Provençal* “Les CIQ du 15e contre la mosquée” November 19 1989.

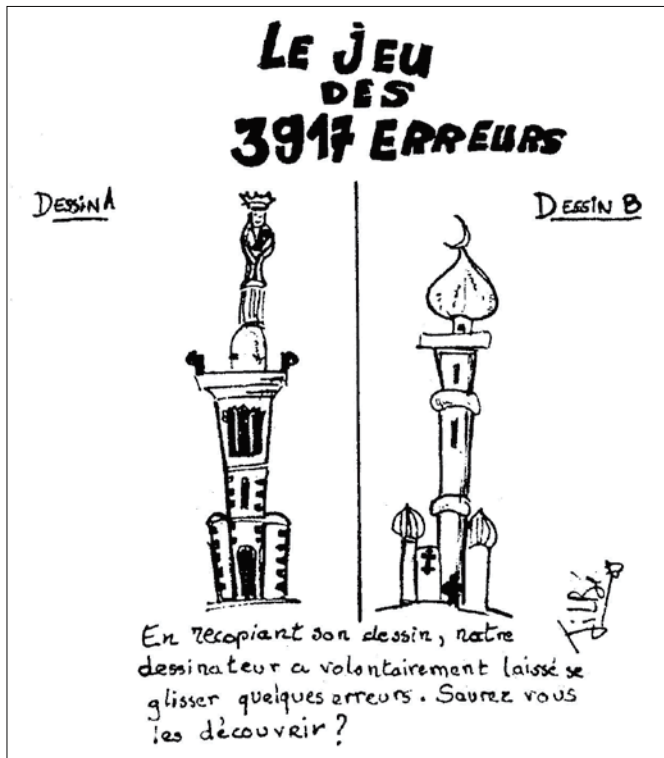
302. [“Le sénateur-maire est le représentant de la communauté musulmane et non marseillaise”] in *Le Méridional* November 20 1989.

303. *Le Méridional* November 18 1989.

304. *Le Méridional* October 18 1989 and “Le projet avance masqué” in *Le Méridional* January 11 1990.

305. *Le Méridional* October 18 1989.

church. The cartoon therefore invited the reader to understand that in the context of Marseilles that comparison was “a mistake” (*une erreur*).



Picture 7.2 Cartoon in *Semaine Provence*, October 1989

Fourth, protesters against the “Cathedral Mosque” argued that their opposition should not be equated with the refusal to grant Muslims religious freedom.³⁰⁶ Often protesters said that “of course” Muslims were entitled to practice their religion. At closer look the protesters also articulated a different view of the smaller places of worship in Marseilles. The advocates of the building of a Cathedral Mosque had spoken of the smaller houses of worship as “*mosquées-hangars*” and as grungy prayer spaces in “basements and garages”.³⁰⁷ Protesters, on the other hand spoke more positively about “neighbourhood mosques” (*mosquées de quartiers*)³⁰⁸ and suggested to cater to Muslim needs via the construction of “a number of smaller mosques” (*plusieurs mosquées de moindre importance*).³⁰⁹

306. As Le Pen put it “Yes to the mosque...but in the countries of origin” [“Oui à la mosquée... mais dans le pays d’origine”] in *Le Méridional* 24 November 1989.

307. *La Marseillaise* November 5 1989.

308. “Non à Hollywood” in *Le Méridional* November 18 1989.

309. *Le Provençal* November 23 1989.

During the months of October and November 1989 those who protested against the building of a Great Mosque in Marseilles had the wind of public opinion in their sails. The expulsion of two Muslim girls from a public school in Creil in early October led to the first so-called headscarves controversy and led to a wider public debate on Islam, *laïcité*, integration, women's emancipation and fundamentalism.³¹⁰ In the first round of the legislative elections held in the Bouches-du-Rhône department on November 26 1989, Front National candidates won over 30% of the votes in several electoral districts in Marseilles. The headline of an article in *Le Monde* on the outcomes of the elections read "Marseilles: the mosque effect".³¹¹

The mayor explains the motives and sets the conditions

On November 27 1989, the mayor of Marseilles spoke in the municipal council, in response to questions raised by the Front National. Vigouroux declared himself to belong to those people "who have never understood what a racial prejudice can mean" and for him, a doctor by training, "mankind was one" (*l'humanité est une*). He cited articles 10 and 11 of the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen of 1789 that speak of religious freedom, freedom of conscience and freedom of speech. It was illustrative of the polarised structuring of debates on immigrant integration issues in France in the late 1980s that the issue of building a mosque was framed as being about a confrontation between defenders of Republican and humanist ideals versus political forces representing those who were racially prejudiced and refused to recognise the religious freedom of Muslims. This struggle was then linked to the particular history and handling of diversity in Marseilles.

The mayor mentioned that since 1953 20 Catholic churches and 10 Chapels had been built in the city, 25 synagogues and 4 protestant churches, as well as Armenian, Greek-Orthodox and Russian-Orthodox churches, and a Buddhist pagoda. Enabling the Muslims to construct a Grand Mosque thus seemed to be a matter of fairness and equity. Moreover, so he underlined, one could not talk about building a mosque in France without "also mentioning all those Muslims who have died for our country during the First and Second World wars, and how could we forget those who chose our nationality in difficult times, whilst maintaining their religion".³¹²

In presenting the issue of mosque establishment in these terms the mayor had put a lot of emphasis on the symbolical importance of the project. Building a mosque was about the great moral values of humankind and about the tradition of tolerance that was characteristic of Marseilles. The mayor, however, formulated a number of preconditions for the project to be carried through. These preconditions reflected the wider concerns about the need for an "Islam of France" and for progressive assimilation of newcomers. The mosque would only be built when there was a request of the representatives of Islam in Marseilles. The new building would be "a mosque as a place of worship... and nothing else" and the municipality would not finance its construction. Furthermore, the mosque should become an "instrument of integration" (*outil d'intégration*) not "a hideout of fundamentalists creating divisions" (*un repaire fractionniste*

310. See Kepel 1994; and Bowen 2006.

311. "Marseille: l'effet mosquée" in *Le Monde* November 28 1989.

312. ["Comment à ce propos ne pas évoquer tous les musulmans morts pour notre pays pendant la première et seconde guerre mondiale, comment oublier ceux qui ont opté pour notre nationalité en des temps difficiles mais en conservant leur religion."] Speech of Vigouroux in the municipal council of Marseilles on November 27 1989.

de l'intégrisme). The mosque could not be built in the most urbanised centre of the city, but it should also not be established in the periphery in order to avoid "any danger of marginalisation". The director should have French nationality and the mosque should not come under the control of any foreign government and for this reason it was indispensable that external financial funds should come from different sources.

These ideas and preconditions were in part responses to the debate in the local media. The idea that the new mosque would exclusively function as a house of worship was a hardly concealed critique of Slimani's plans for a multipurpose Study Centre on Islamic Civilisations. However, most of the other conditions were informed by the wider governing strategy aimed at integration and creating an "Islam of France". The role of the municipality was now narrowed down to helping the Muslims to come up with a project that would carry the support of the community. In so doing the mayor had firmly focussed the building of a central mosque toward the larger issue of the organisation of Islam in France and in Marseilles.

Organising Islam and representing the Muslim community

The idea of the mayor helping to create a consensus among the different representatives of the Muslims in Marseilles, came at a time when several initiatives were ongoing to create Muslim institutions and interlocutors at the national level. Since 1982 the Algerian government and the Paris Mosque had become increasingly involved in the organisation of Islam in France, by setting up federations in different parts of France and staffing mosques with imams that were remunerated by the Algerian state. One of the federations created under the auspices of the Mosque of Paris was the *Fédération des Musulmans du Sud de la France* (FRMSF) founded in Marseilles in 1988. This federation was put under the presidency of Bachir Dahmani, an Algerian immigrant worker who had been one of the "working class imams" (*imams ouvriers*) in Marseilles in the 1960s and who was now the rector of the *En Nasr* mosque at La Capellette. The other organisational centre of Islam in Marseilles was the mosque in Rue Bon Pasteur in the centre of the city near the Porte d'Aix where Hadj Alili was the rector. The Algerian-born Alili claimed to represent a mosque association that was truly local and that was struggling to maintain its autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Algerian government and consulate, and the Paris Mosque. Alili's prestige as a "Muslim spokesman" in Marseilles had grown considerably because he had been invited in March 1989 by the Minister of the Interior, Pierre Joxe, as one of the six Muslim personalities in France that were preparing the formation of the *Conseil de Réflexion sur l'islam en France* (CORIF). That council was to convene for the first time in March 1990.

In early January the mayor spoke with ten Muslim representatives. It became clear that it was unlikely that a consensual project for a central mosque would emerge soon. Hence the Mayor announced that he could not go any further with the project until the Muslims had come to an agreement.³¹³ Mustapha Slimani decided to withdraw his project now that he was confronted with increasing protests and critiques from within the Muslim community.³¹⁴ The FRMSF, affiliated with the Mosque of Paris, was preparing a project of its own. In January it

313. See interview in *Le Méridional* January 11 1990.

314. "La mosquée divise les musulmans" in *Le Provençal* January 29 1990.

effectively came up with a proposal that had been developed with the help of the local section of the Algerian *Amicales* and the cultural and educative centre of the Algerian consulate (Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 245). However, apparently the political momentum for the construction of the Cathedral Mosque in Marseilles had already passed. The municipality seemed unwilling to make a clear choice for the faction supported by the Algerian consulate and the Paris Mosque.³¹⁵ The idea had initially been to build a mosque for all Muslims in Marseilles. Two months later Alili declared in an interview that there was no urgent need for a mosque in Marseilles. It was far more urgent to create a Muslim cemetery.³¹⁶

In the course of 1990 and 1991 dramatic events at the national and international level would contribute greatly to a reorientation of governing strategies towards Islam in France and also in Marseilles. These events included notably the electoral breakthrough of the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS)) in Algeria. When the military regime decided to annul the elections and repress the FIS, a period of civil war began in Algeria. In addition there were the preparations for the First Gulf War in 1990. The fact that the French government decided to become militarily involved fuelled ethnic tensions in French society. Finally, there was the racist profanation of the Jewish cemetery in Carpentras, not far from Marseilles, in June 1990. This event sent a shockwave through French society, it led to proposals to outlaw the Front National and contributed to the fear that France might be on the brink of a period of inter-ethnic and racist violence.

In response to these various dramatic events and developments the municipality of Marseilles developed a strategy that was aimed at de-escalation. Instead of making recognition of the Muslim community a major issue, municipal policy now focussed on mutual respect and tranquillity between the different communities.³¹⁷ The municipality also decided to cooperate primarily with the local Muslim associations that were affiliated with the Paris Mosque. In August 1990 the president of the mosque in Rue Bon Pasteur, Hadj Alili, had made public statements declaring that France had nothing to do in the conflict in the Middle East and that the Americans had dirtied the consecrated places in Saudi Arabia by bringing “alcohol and AIDS” with them (cited in Cesari 1994: 102). As a consequence, the municipality would soon seek to marginalize Alili and the mosque in rue Bon Pasteur. The mosque at La Capelette, affiliated with the Mosque of Paris, was selected as the main institutional partner for the municipality in community affairs.

315. The plans to build a mosque in Lyons, which had been defended by the Mayor of Lyons, Michel Noir, also in the Fall of 1989 were successful. However, these plans originated in the early 1980s and were carried by an association called the *Association Culturelle Lyonnaise Islamo-française* (ACLIF) dominated by *harkis*. The president of the ACLIF, Rabah Khelifi said during the inauguration of the mosque in 1994 that it would become “a permanent proof that Islam can be practiced in the strict observance of the laws of the French Republic”. Typically in the eyes of French authorities the mosque did very well perform its role as a Grand Mosque, precisely because it was controlled by a rector who was both a *harki* and closely befriended with the representatives of the Paris Mosque. The downside of this municipal strategy of selective cooperation was that the new building that could cater for 1500 worshippers was relatively little frequented by the great majority of Muslims in Lyons. Relations between the mosque of Lyons and the Paris Mosque became less friendly in the late 1990s. See Kepel 1991 and 1994; Battegay 1995 and 1993; and Granet 1993.

316. “Les musulmans réclament leur cimetière” in *Le Provençal* March 26 1990.

317. In 1990 an inter-religious platform called *Marseille Espérance* was constituted that was to exemplify antiracism, tolerance and mutual respect among the different religious communities.

7.3. Algeria, the Paris Mosque and *l'islam des jeunes*

The French government had decided to support the Algerian military regime in its war against the FIS; it thus had chosen sides in a conflict that became increasingly violent between 1991 and 1994. Militants and sympathisers of the FIS and the Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armée*) (GIA) sought refuge in France and tried to find support for their cause (Kepel 1994: 318ff.). The civil war in Algeria also reached France in the form of terrorist attacks. The high-jacking of a plane ended on the airport of Marseilles in December 1994 and a wave of bombings on subway stations in Paris – the bloodiest one being at the Saint Michel station causing 5 deaths in July 1995 – led to concern. These events stimulated further collaboration between French and Algerian intelligence services. They would indirectly also create new opportunities for the Paris Mosque to impose itself as the essential actor in the organisation of Islam in France.

The government of the Right that had succeeded to power in 1993 developed a tougher stance on issues of immigration and immigrant integration. The personification of this new approach was Charles Pasqua (*Rassemblement pour la République*, RPR), who was responsible for a new nationality code and new legislation that would allow for more immigration control (Favell 1998: 156ff.). Pasqua had already been Minister of the Interior in the mid-1980s and at the time he had spoken out in favour of an approach to Islam in France in which French authorities would closely collaborate with the authorities in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Now back in power he decided to try and see to the development of a “French Islam” under the leadership of the Paris Mosque. Since 1992 the institute was presided over by Dalil Boubakeur, the son of Si Hamza Boubakeur who had been the rector between 1957 and 1982. The new rector was an Algerian civil servant who positioned himself as the unavoidable partner for French authorities if they wanted to create a moderate and liberal “Islam of France”. With support of the Algerian government the Paris Mosque had, not unsuccessfully, tried to find political supporters, notably in the circles of the RPR.

In order to further develop the forming of Islamic representative bodies a text for a Charter of the Muslim Religion (*Charte du Culte Musulmane*) was written up which was co-signed by Charles Pasqua in December 1994. The charter would serve to create a new Representative Council of the Muslims of France (*Conseil Représentatif des Musulmans de France*) that would function under the aegis of the Paris Mosque.³¹⁸ The ways the French government, and in particular Charles Pasqua, sought to impose an organisational model upon Islam in France in the mid 1990s echoed specific historical traditions. It continued the Gallican and Concorditarian traditions, because of the ways the French state was involved in the constitution of an “Islam of France”. It sought to bind Muslims to the Republic via a Charter signed by the rector of the Paris Mosque. This form of cooptation aimed at creating Islamic institutions that collaborated with French authorities to enhance the formation of a “liberal” Islam was almost an exact copy

318. Geisser and Zemouri argue that the text of this Charter was written by the French political scientist Franck Frégosi. Amongst other things it contained an eulogy on the role of “Muslims” in the French army in the First and Second World Wars and praised the way Muslims in present day France “by their work, their intelligence and their creativity” contributed to the “defence and glory of the Nation and to its prosperity and radiation in the world” (cited in Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 53-54, my translation, M.M.).

of colonial government of Islam.³¹⁹ The Paris Mosque also became the only institution officially qualified to monitor the production of ritually sacrificed meat and to levy a tax on it. The institute would hold this monopoly until 1995.³²⁰ In other policy domains, however, the government sought to strengthen what it defined as the Republican and secularist integration model. In September 1994, for example, Minister of Education Bayrou had issued a directive requiring school principals to ban all “ostentatious” signs, especially headscarves, from schools (Bowen 2006: 89). The actual effects of these strategies would be limited, however, because a new government acceded to power in 1995. The new Minister of the Interior, Jean-Louis Debré, did not pursue the same strategy of privileging the Paris Mosque (cf. Geisser and Zemouri 2007).

Between 1995 and 1997, and later when a new Socialist government acceded to power, there were no coordinated efforts to regulate issues such as the training of clergy and chaplains, and the marketing of religious products. The Paris Mosque continued to function as the privileged interlocutor and host for French authorities. A constant theme in the self-positioning of the leaders of the Mosque of Paris was that they were able to obstruct the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in France and that they could best represent and develop the “liberal” Islam of France. In order to develop their influence the leaders of the Paris Mosque planned to install a number of regional “muftis” or Islamic legal experts in France who would oversee the activities of the local Muslim associations. Yet, it was clear that the role of other Islamic associations and federations, such as the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) and the *Fédération nationale des musulmans de France* (FNMF), as representatives of Muslims in France could not be denied. One reason for their growing visibility in the institutional landscape was that these Muslim organisations counted many younger Muslims among their constituency.

Early studies on Islam had largely focused on processes of institutionalisation and the history of Islam in France.³²¹ A new generation of researchers had come up however, who specialised in the study of the so-called “Islam of the young” (*l’islam des jeunes*). They often criticized the alarmist tone in public debate on Islam and articulated a far more optimistic story. According to many scholars for second and third generation Muslims, mostly children of North African immigrants, the attachment to Islam did not primarily mean that they had deeply felt religious beliefs or strictly observed religious practices. Oftentimes speaking of oneself as “Muslim” served as a marker of cultural and ethnic identity.³²² The image of the younger generations of Muslims becoming more flexible, liberal and individualised could be represented as a confirmation of the success of the French model of *intégration* and its institutions such as the secular public schools.³²³

319. See Ternisien 2004; and Geisser and Zemouri 2007.

320. The two major other Muslim federations, the FNMF and the UOIF, that until then each supervised an instance of supervision on the production of halal products, contested this unique privilege given to the Paris Mosque. In 1995 the monopoly of the Paris Mosque was ended (Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 53-54).

321. Kepel had celebrated the French Republican model of integration in a comparative study on Islam in France, the United States and Britain and he continuously warned against the risk of younger generations of Muslims embracing radicalism, especially because of the influence of organisations such as the Tabligh, the *Union des Jeunes Musulmans* (UJM) and the UOIF, the latter being, so he argued, “close to the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood” (Kepel 1994: 293ff.).

322. See for example Cesari 1994; Babès 1997; Khosrokhavar 1998; and Lamchichi 1999.

323. See Wiewiorka (ed.) 1996; and Gaspard and Khosrokhavar 1995.

In the meantime in Marseilles a new political wind was blowing. In 1995 Jean Claude Gaudin (*Démocratie Liberale*, DL) had replaced Vigouroux as Mayor of the city. Gaudin, a former collaborator of Gaston Defferre, was a devout Catholic known for his conservative ideas on issues related to immigration and Islam.³²⁴ The new municipal government was determined to raise the reputation of Marseilles to the level of a middle-class city and a centre of culture and learning. Speaking of the many ethnic businesses in the city the new Mayor argued that the city centre was now “too coloured” (*trop colorée*) (Péraldi and Samson 2005: 29ff.). Urban re-development programs resulted in the creation of new apartments, facilities and infrastructure to attract more well off, preferably native French, residents to live in Marseilles.

When it came to the further development of Islamic institutions, Marseilles was confronted with a rather curious development. In the framework of the new Charter of the Muslim Religion, the Paris Mosque had in 1995 nominated Soheib Bencheikh as the “mufti of Marseilles”. Bencheikh was the son of the rector of the Mosque of Paris between 1982 and 1989, Sheikh Abbas. Bencheikh presented himself as a “theologian” who had been sent to educate the Muslim population in Southern France and to stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.³²⁵ The media spoke of a young, talented intellectual who had studied in Cairo and Paris. This (self-) presentation did not make Bencheikh particularly popular among Muslim representatives in Marseilles.³²⁶ The new mufti was supposed to work from the mosque at La Capelette. However, almost immediately the relations between Bencheikh and the rector of that mosque, Bachir Dahmani, deteriorated. Bencheikh who lived most of the time in Paris had become a “mufti of Marseilles” without a mosque to preach in and without Muslims to educate. He created a new association, which was called the *Comité des Affaires Islamiques* (CORAI) which brought together a number of local politicians, lawyers and businessmen with a “Muslim background”. Soon it became clear that Bencheikh had managed to mobilize an audience among the “secular” ethnic elites, but most of all in the national and international media. For the media the new “mufti of Marseilles” was a major “reformer of Islam” in France.

In 1996 Bencheikh presented a plan for a “Grand Mosque” and a “Muslim Institute”. The new centre would bring Islamic practice out “in bright daylight”, it would become “the display window and the opening of the Mosque towards the exterior” (*la vitrine et l’ouverture de la Mosquée vers l’extérieur*), and a place for encounters and exchanges with non-Muslims. The design and architecture of the new building were represented as “resolutely modern” (*résolument moderne*). The building with a small futuristic minaret could provide for about 2000 Muslim worshippers.³²⁷

The ultramodern mosque project of Bencheikh supposedly served to contribute to the development of an “Islam of France”. The “mufti” spoke of this Islam in opposition to the kind of Islamic fundamentalism that was being preached and practiced in basements. The Islam that

324. Between 1986 and 1988 Gaudin had presided a coalition government in the Regional Assembly of the PACA region with the support of the Front National.

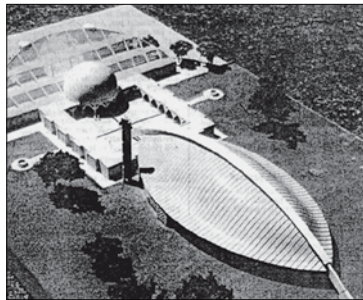
325. Bencheikh had studied at the Islamic Institute in Algiers, and at the university of al-Ashar in Cairo and written a thesis at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. His thesis was published as *Marianne et le Prophète* in 1998.

326. See also chapter 3.

327. Citations from brochure “L’institut musulman et la mosquée de Marseille. Présentation du projet” EUROMED Marseille 1996. Personal archive of the author.

he advocated was modern, respectful of secularism, visible and transparent, educated and open towards French society. These characteristics were in the mosque plan of Bencheikh almost literally transposed upon the building and its architecture. However, there was nothing local about this plan for a Grand Mosque in Marseilles, not in terms of its architecture, which was futuristic and not *Provençal*, nor in terms of the people who supposedly were going to carry out the project. The most notable example of the latter was the “mufti” himself who was seen as a *Parisien* not as a *Marseillais*.

Picture 7.3 Project Mosque



Marseilles, 1996

The project could not count on the support of local Muslim representatives. A handful of articles appeared in the local press that mentioned the new plans for a mosque. However, the local media who were well informed had concluded that the new mosque plans were primarily an event that was staged by the isolated “mufti of Marseilles”. It was as if in Marseilles once in a while some individual would come forward and present a project for a large Islamic centre to be built in the city without having a clue about the Muslim association that was to carry out the project. In that sense Bencheikh was a successor of the businessman Slimani.

At the municipality the new plans for a Grand Mosque met with scepticism if not hostility. For the new municipal government the further accommodation of Islam in the city was certainly not a priority, to say the least. The story goes that when Gaudin was confronted with the mufti’s plans for a mosque, he exclaimed: “If you want to build a mosque go and build it in Marrakech”. To the press the new mayor was equally outspoken: “As long as I will be in command, there will be no mosque in Marseilles”.³²⁸ The new municipality did continue to play the politics of symbolic recognition and presented the inter-religious platform *Marseilles Espérance*, founded in 1990, as a major illustration of the well-wishing attitude of the municipality towards the different “communities”. At the occasion of Muslim religious celebrations, such as the Sacrifice Feast or the Ramadan, the mayor would visit the mosque at la Capelette, affiliated with the Paris Mosque thus underscoring that this mosque was de facto seen as the major institution of local Islam.

328. Cited in *Le Figaro*, October 18 2001. The statement had been made in 1996. This was confirmed to me in interviews with Mohammed Laqhila and Soheib Bencheikh held in 2001 and 2002.

7.4. Islam of France and the Islamic Religious and Cultural Centre of Marseilles

In November 1999 the Minister of the Interior in the government of Lionel Jospin, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, initiated a Consultation in view of developing representative bodies and institutions that would allow Islam to “join the other religions at the table of the Republic”.³²⁹ The Consultation would last from 1999 until the Spring of 2003 when Regional Muslim Councils were elected and the French Council of the Muslim Religion (CFCM) was created.³³⁰ The Consultation made the need for adequate mosques in France an issue on the national policy agenda. The Consultation’s working group on Islamic houses of worship that worked closely together with officials of the Office of Organised Religions, a part of the Ministry of the Interior, issued an intermediate report in June 2000. The same year the High Council on Integration (HCI) also published a report entitled *Islam in the Republic* that discussed the situation of mosques at length. Both reports helped to characterize the situation of mosques in France as a *problématique* that called for a coordinated response by the national government, not only to improve the conditions for Muslim religious practice but also to avoid a further divergence of policy and legal practices across France.³³¹

The working group on Islamic houses of worship observed that the vast majority of mosques in France were still prayer halls in “discarded factories, garages, premises, and sometimes even simple basements”. Despite the fact that there were now about five million Muslims in France “only eight mosques with a perceptible minaret” existed in the whole country.³³² Many Muslims were said to believe that municipal authorities systematically obstructed their legitimate demands to create more adequate houses of worship. The advisory council argued that the absence of noticeable and decent houses of worship created “a feeling of injustice, which turns itself against public authorities”.³³³ Younger generations of Muslims in France were said to be concerned about issues such as visibility and recognition.

329. Chevènement had used this figure of speech in a talk in Strasbourg in 1997 (cf. Frégosi 1998). The image of Islam being invited “at the table of the Republic” was also used in a declaration marking the beginning of the Consultation process on January 28 2000. See “La lettre du 29 Octobre 1999 invitant les organisations et personnalités musulmanes à la consultation”. On the early phase of the Consultation see “L’islam à la française, selon Chevènement” in *Le Monde* February 19 2000. Also Ternisien 2004.

330. By consequence the Consultation also involved successive French governments and Ministers of the Interior, the latter also being responsible for the Central Office of Organised Religions (*Bureau Central des Cultes*). These Ministers were Jean-Pierre Chevènement (1997 to 2000) and Daniel Vaillant (2000 to 2002) under the Socialist government, and Nicolas Sarkozy (2002 to 2004) and Dominique de Villepin (2004-2005) under the government of the Right. Despite the changes in political leadership the continuity of the Consultation was maintained because a group of councillors worked on the dossier (see Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 69ff.). The second elections for the Muslim Councils were held in 2005 and the third are to take place in 2008. On the Consultation see notably Laurence (ed.) (2005); Laurence and Vaisse (2006); Bowen 2006; Jansen 2006; and Geisser and Zemouri (2007).

331. The 1995 report of the HCI had also suggested that building “decent mosques” might help to combat radicalism (Peter 2008).

332. These were amongst others the mosques in Paris, Mantes-la-Jolie, Évry, Roubaix, and Lyons. The HCI report also mentioned that most prayer spaces were located in already existing premises that had been converted for the new function (HCI 2000: 36).

333. [“un sentiment d’injustice qui se retourne contre les pouvoirs public”] (HCI 2000: 37).

Allowing for the building of Great Mosques thereby seemed to be a way of responding to these demands for recognition. A similar point was made in an editorial of *Le Monde* published in March 2001 and entitled “constructing mosques”:

the incorporation of a “Cathedral-Mosque” in the urban landscape stimulates the integration of Muslims, many of whom have French nationality. Because, beyond the needs of the worshippers, the establishment of a Grand Mosque is first and foremost a symbol: it represents the integration and the recognition of Islam.³³⁴

The policy reports showed that different municipalities had chosen different strategies. In Rennes, Nantes and Montpellier the municipal authorities had directly or indirectly financed some of the building costs of mosques. In order to bypass legal obstacles, they had officially spoken of the creation of Islamic “cultural centres” or municipal “multipurpose spaces” (*salles polyvalentes*) that were being rented out to “civil associations”. In larger cities such as Strasbourg and Toulouse there were ongoing negotiations regarding the building of a Grand City Mosque. Whereas several municipalities had thus become more supportive of the creation of “real mosques” (*vraies mosquées*),³³⁵ other municipal governments refused any kind of accommodation and even had recourse to semi- or illegal strategies such as systematically using the municipality’s “right to dispensation” (*droit de préemption*) to claim building sites in order to prevent the building of new mosques. These policy reports confirmed that Muslims in France were in fact confronted with practices of unequal treatment in their demands to create prayer houses.

In 2000 a directive (*circulaire*) was drawn up by the French government, reminding local authorities of the most important prevailing legal obligations and of the possibilities to facilitate the creation of houses of worship. These included notably the possibility of letting out real estate spaces in long term leases for a symbolic amount (*bail emphytéotique*) to Muslim associations as well as possibilities of financing cultural activities.³³⁶ It was relatively new for the national government to so explicitly address municipal governments with the request to help improve the situation of Islamic houses of worship.

Another development was the introduction of overview studies on the total number of mosques and their housing situation. That policy practice would turn out to be crucial for the subsequent development of policy frameworks and approaches.³³⁷ Different institutions and organisations were in need of a more accurate overview of mosques in France. For example, the creation of the electoral lists for the elections of the Muslim Councils required insight in

334. [“est-il admissible que les croyants de la deuxième religion de France, l’Islam, soient encore contraints de prier dans des lieux de culte exiguës et inconfortables? Et que les fidèles musulmans (...) déplient leurs tapis sur le trottoir de nos villes? (...) l’inscription dans le paysage urbain d’une (...) ‘mosquée cathédrale’ favorise l’intégration des musulmans, dont beaucoup sont de nationalité française. Car, au-delà des besoins des fidèles, la construction d’une grande mosquée est surtout un symbole: elle représente l’intégration et la reconnaissance de l’islam.”] Editorial in *Le Monde* March 10 2001.

335. See Groupe de travail No 1 Lieux de culte musulmans. Jean-François Simon (ed.) Rapport d’étape. Available on www.interieur.gouv.fr/information/publications/istichara, extracted March 21 2002.

336. “Des élus de mauvaise foi” in *L’Express* June 15 2000.

337. In earlier times only rough estimates had been made of the total number of mosques and mosque associations in France. This kind of overview had been made by bodies such as the CIEMM, the BOLIM, the ADRI, and the Domestic Intelligence Service.

the surface of houses of worship.³³⁸ The Consultation's working group needed a description of the housing situation of mosques in order to begin with the development of plans for improvement.³³⁹ Individual Muslims experienced the need for more information on the location of mosques in France, for example in order to know where to worship while sojourning in another city. The association *La Boussole* made a directory (*annuaire*) of mosques in the Paris region in 2000 followed by a very complete and detailed directory of mosques in the whole of France in 2003 (Ternisien 2004: 66).

7.4.1. Mosque building on the political agenda in Marseilles: "Everybody agrees that there should be a mosque in Marseilles"

Against the wider background of the public discussions about Islam, the building of a mosque reappeared on the municipal agenda in Marseilles. In November 1999 a number of municipal council members and city district politicians who presented themselves as "of the Muslim faith" (*de confession musulmane*), came up with a petition demanding the creation of a mosque and an institute of Islamic culture in the city.³⁴⁰ The demand that a mosque be built was inscribed into the political program of the coalition of the Left parties (*La gauche plurielle*) for the municipal elections of March 2001.

Even though the issue of building a mosque thus became a part of the political debate around the municipal elections it did not provoke a great polemic. In fact, an observer of public discussions in Marseilles in 2000 and 2001 would probably be struck by the level of agreement on the need to build a mosque in the city. In the interviews conducted at the time with political leaders, chairmen of Muslim organisations, chairmen of residents association and individual citizens there appeared to be a wide consensus on the matter. The president of the mosque in La Capelette, Dahmani, said: "The Muslims are numerous. A symbol should be given to them".³⁴¹ The director of the Mayor's Cabinet, Claude Bertrand, confirmed: "Marseilles needs a Grand Mosque".³⁴² The president of one of the residents associations in the Northern districts of Marseilles argued that he and his constituency thought that the mosque should not be built in "their" district, but nevertheless stressed that they agreed "there should be a mosque

338. Prayer spaces were assigned one grand elector per hundred square meters. Great Mosques and prayer spaces larger than 800 square meters receive fifteen grand electors and the Paris Mosque eighteen (Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 300).

339. The Regional Muslim Councils that began to function in 2003 oftentimes also counted among their priorities to make an overview study on the total number of prayer spaces in the region and to make an inventory of the adequacy of mosques in view of the needs of the Muslim population.

340. See "Pétition pour l'établissement d'une mosquée et d'un institut culturel musulman à Marseille" November 24 1999. Also "Le Grand Mufti de Marseille: 'Immuniser les musulmans contre les dérives de l'Islam'" in *La Marseillaise* November 23 1999.

341. ["Les musulmans sont nombreux. Il faut leur donner un symbole."] Interview with Bachir Dahmani, March 19 2002.

342. Interview with Claude Bertrand April 17 2002.

in Marseilles”.³⁴³ Also the president of the platform of all residents’ associations in the city underlined that a mosque was necessary because it was not “satisfactory that mosques be located in garages”.³⁴⁴ Somehow stating that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” had become something banal and self-evident. Given the long and contentious history of the idea of building a mosque in the city it seems rather puzzling that such a wide agreement should now emerge.

To understand how this came about it is necessary to initially look at two different, yet related, aspects: first, the ways the need for a mosque was represented via specific images, a vocabulary and comparisons with the housing situation of other religious communities in Marseilles; second, the way the phrase “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” functioned as the cement in a discourse coalition of local actors who had quite different and even diverging understandings of the issue. One of the images that most strongly evoked the need for “a mosque” was the photograph of Muslims praying out in the open in front of the mosque in Rue Bon Pasteur on Friday afternoon. Pictures of this scene had appeared regularly in local newspapers, weeklies and broadcasts in Marseilles.³⁴⁵ The petition in favour of a mosque spoke of Muslims forced to pray in “unworthy and degrading ‘religious shelters’” and of Muslims “practicing Islam in a state of disgrace!”.³⁴⁶ It had stipulated that the absence of a Grand Mosque was an “injustice” that was illustrative of the marginalisation of Islam in Marseilles.³⁴⁷ The need for a Grand Mosque was also systematically linked to the housing situation of the other religious communities in Marseilles, especially those of immigrant origin, such as the Jewish and the Armenian-Christian communities. A short broadcast on the mosque project on local television showed images of churches juxtaposed with the image of Muslim men worshipping in Rue Bon Pasteur while the voice-over stated:

In Marseilles, the main religious communities have decent places of worship in the city, with the exception of the Muslims, who nonetheless represent 200,000 people. Here, the synagogue, there, the Armenian church, but no Grand Mosque.³⁴⁸

Another omnipresent image was evoked via the phrase “the Islam of the basements” (*l’islam des caves*). It helped to construct an image of Muslim religious practice in concealed and sombre spaces. A Grand Mosque would make Islamic practice “more transparent” and a local journalist suggested that the establishment of a house of worship that was “worthy of the name” would

343. Interview with Marius Rodriguez and René Colo January 22 2002. The observation that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” was followed by the remark “... but not in a neighbourhood like ours” [“mais pas dans un quartier comme le nôtre”].

344. [“ce n’est pas satisfaisant ... des mosquées qui se retrouvent dans des garages.”] Interview with Mrs Cordier March 29 2002.

345. See for instance the picture in the weekly *Ventilo* October 18-24 2001.

346. [“abris de culte indignes et dégradants”] and [“vivre l’islam dans la honte!”] For complete reference see footnote above.

347. “Pétition pour une mosquée à Marseille” in *La Marseillaise* January 11 2000.

348. [“A Marseille, les principales communautés religieuses disposent en ville de lieux de culte décents, à l’exception des musulmans, qui représentent pourtant 200,000 personnes. Ici, la synagogue, là l’église arménienne, mais pas de grande mosquée.”] Item “Projet de grande mosquée à Marseille” *Woche* May 5 2000.

be “a way of fighting against the different forms of extremism”.³⁴⁹ Others argued that a large mosque would enable Muslims to invite non-Muslims to attend cultural activities and celebrations at the occasion of the Sacrifice Feast and the Ramadan.³⁵⁰

In this context it was reasonable to declare that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” (*il faut une mosquée à Marseille*). In this way a discourse coalition was being formed around the idea that a mosque should be built in Marseilles. A discourse coalition has been defined as a group of actors sharing a social construct. In contrast to a coalition based on shared interests, a discourse coalition can also exist when the actors seemingly agree on an issue by uttering the same (or similar) catch phrases or slogans, albeit sometimes for different reasons and with different understandings of the exact meaning of the statement or slogan.

For political decision makers in Marseilles it was important that there now seemed to exist such a wide consensus. The re-elected Mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin, announced during the opening speech of his new six year mandate in June 2001 that he would start a process that should lead to the creation of an “Islamic cultural centre” that would include the “Grand Mosque, but also a library and a school, rooms for receptions and meetings”.³⁵¹ The municipality would start with a series of hearings to find “representative interlocutors of the Muslim community”. Once those interlocutors would have been identified they would, in collaboration with the municipality, decide on a location for the new complex. The Mayor also announced that the municipality was willing to make public subventions available for the activities that would be organised in the cultural centre.

7.4.2. Everybody agrees... on what?

Now that the new municipal government had given its support, the coming of a Grand Mosque seemed finally within reach. However, at a closer look underneath the general support for “a mosque” there existed diverging ideas. When reading through the various statements and arguments in favour of the new mosque made in the period between 1999 and the summer of 2001 one finds they could be linked to radically different views on the integration of the Muslim community in Marseilles. Analytically the following three views could be reconstructed, even though, at least in 2001, neither the actors themselves nor the media represented the ongoing debates in terms of these different views:

In a *pluralist view* emphasis was put on the Great Mosque’s dual symbolic and community function for the Muslim community. A “real” mosque would cater to the needs of Muslims

349. [“un lieu de culte digne de ce nom (...) un moyen de lutter contre les intégrismes”] in “Le ministre de la Ville et la communauté musulmane” in *La Marseillaise* January 11 2000. The idea was also mentioned in the interview with the presidents of the residents associations in Marseilles: [“Et le fait d’avoir ces mosquées cachées permet surtout le développement des thèses des ultras, donc, tout le monde pense que ça sera une bonne chose qu’il y aurait des mosquées.”] Interview with Mrs. Cordier March 29 2002.

350. “La mosquée c’est pour quand?” in *Le Pavé* January 19 2000. Interview with Azzedine Aïnouche March 4 2002. See also “Les Verts réclament une grande mosquée” in *La Provence* February 24 2001.

351. [“un centre culturel musulman, la notion de centre culturel englobant bien sûr la grande mosquée, mais aussi une bibliothèque et une école, des lieux d’accueil et de réunion.”] Speech of Gaudin, municipal council Marseilles, June 25 2001.

on Fridays and during religious celebrations, but it would also fill the Muslim community with pride and should serve as symbol of the recognition of Islam.³⁵² A second view, a *Republican-assimilationist view*, suggested that the building of a mosque was first and foremost a step in the development of an “Islam of France”. In this perspective the new mosque would be an illustration of the willingness of Muslims in Marseilles to choose for France and to become “French Muslims”. In a third view, a *Mediterranean view*, the future Grand Mosque was primarily represented as a cultural centre that would enable both the Muslim and the non-Muslim inhabitants of Marseilles to rediscover Islamic culture. In this view the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris was a major point of reference.

These different views could be distinguished analytically, but they were not crucial to the way the actors perceived the debate. What was at the forefront of the interpretations of the debate was that there was a wide *agreement* on the need for “a mosque”. Until now I have argued that this should be explained by two factors: the specific images and vocabulary in which the need for a mosque was represented and the formation of a wide discourse coalition around the phrase “there should be a mosque in Marseilles”. However, there were two additional factors.

For a long time it had seemed that building a mosque in Marseilles was primarily a response to the needs and interests of Muslims in the city. However, when reading through the newspapers and interviews in the early years of the 21st century it appeared as if there were also clear benefits for the city as a whole. Some people argued, for example, that the ongoing efforts to create Islamic institutions created an urgent need to have a Grand Mosque in Marseilles in order that the city function as one of the key institutional centres of the newly emerging “Islam of France.” Marseilles should not be marginalized in the field of Muslim institutions in France at it should not lose out to cities such as Paris, Lyons and Strasbourg. Another argument suggested that the building of a Grand Mosque would further add to the view of Marseilles as one of the few larger cities in France that had been able to successfully deal with immigrant integration issues. Social researchers and journalists had repeatedly argued that “*une exception marseillaise*” existed and that this might explain why Marseilles was one of the few larger cities that had somehow managed to avoid outbursts of rioting and violence in the *banlieues*.³⁵³ Some academics even spoke of Marseilles as “a model, a laboratory, and a paradigmatic example of peaceful cohabitation” (Étienne 2001: 168-170). The director of the City Mayor’s Cabinet, Claude Bertrand, thought that building a mosque fitted well in a local strategy of mixing and integrating different communities:

Marseilles is without doubt, I would say, the European city which most successfully conveys this function of a melting pot (...) that manages to integrate quite well all the communities,

352. Bachir Dahmani observed: “A Christian child can speak about the temple or the church where he worships, a Jewish child about his synagogue, but a little Muslim will not speech about his basement or his garage, because he is ashamed. We want clean, dignified and visible houses of worship for the Muslims ... We want a real mosque.” [“Un enfant chrétien peut parler du temple ou de l’église où il va prier, un enfant juif de sa synagogue, mais un petit musulman ne parlera pas de sa cave ou de son garage, parce qu’il a honte. Nous voulons des lieux de culte propres, dignes et visibles pour les musulmans... Nous voulons une vraie mosquée.”] cited in *Le Pavé* January 19 2000.

353. During the period of riots in French suburbs in the autumn of 2005 Marseilles was again spoken of as one of the few cities in France where inter-ethnic tensions played a minor role. The idea of Marseilles as an exception in France was also mentioned in the Dutch press. See for instance “Uitzicht op zee” in *de Volkskrant* November 21 2005.

and one of the stakes of the construction of a Grand Mosque is to go further in that role of integration and melting pot.³⁵⁴

Also the creation of an Islamic “cultural centre” could be seen as a gain for the city as a whole, especially because there were ongoing attempts to use the “Mediterranean identity” of Marseilles to advertise the city’s rich history and cultural life. Major projects had been developed in the 1990s in the domains of culture, education and tourism.³⁵⁵ The establishment of a large “centre of Islamic culture and learning” seemed to go well with that.

An additional reason why supporting the building of a mosque seemed inevitable was related to the way extreme right parties had succeeded in almost monopolising the political opposition to the mosque. In declaring their agreement with the idea that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” speakers were also positioning themselves in opposition those who were “against the mosque”. In Marseilles the *Mouvement National Républicain* (MNR) – a split off from the Front National created in 1999 – had protested against the new plans for a Grand Mosque as a prominent theme in their political campaign for the 2001 municipal elections. Building a Grand Mosque was said to be illustrative of the cultural “colonisation” and the “islamisation” of the city and a petition in protest of the mosque was headed: “No minarets in Marseilles”.³⁵⁶ In June 2001 the leader of the MNR, Bruno Mégret, protested in the municipal council against the construction of a “monumental mosque”. He warned that building a Grand Mosque would result in a clash of civilisations because there were no examples of a “peaceful and harmonious co-existence of monumental mosques and cathedrals”.³⁵⁷ Building a “monumental mosque” in Marseilles was “anti-

354. [“Marseille est sans doute, je dirai la cité européenne qui réussit le mieux cette fonction de melting pot (...) qui intègre assez bien toutes les communautés et que l’un des enjeux de la construction d’une grande mosquée c’est d’aller plus loin dans ce rôle d’intégration et de melting pot”] Interview with Claude Bertrand April 17 2002. During the consultations Bertrand also invoked this image, arguing: “We know that it is about time that Marseilles, this most successful laboratory in the domain of integration in France, displays the Muslim presence. It is about time, and the Mayor is convinced of this, that Marseilles says to the Muslim community that it is an integral part of this city”. [“Nous savons qu’il est temps que Marseille, laboratoire le plus réussi de France dans le domaine de l’intégration, affiche la présence Musulmane. Il est temps, et le Maire en est persuadé, que Marseille dise à la Communauté Musulmane qu’elle fait partie intégrante de cette ville.”] Official Hearings of the Municipality of Marseilles on the Project for an Islamic Centre (HMMIC) [Comptes-Rendus de la Réunion sur le Centre Culturel et Culturel Musulman] (2001-2002), September 20 2001 p.9. In the annex is a list of the people who were heard during each hearing from which fragments are cited. If relevant the name and function of the speaker is mentioned also.

355. These included for example the further development of the renovated 17th century hospital *La Vieille Charité* that now catered to museums, cultural activities, art exhibitions and various prestigious research institutes. There was also the creation of the *Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme* located close to Marseilles in Aix-en-Provence in 1997 and the building of a spectacular new public library in the city centre that opened in 2003. In addition there were plans to host the new national museum on the history of immigration in Marseilles. In the end the museum was created in Paris however.

356. “Marseille, ville Musulmane? Bruno Mégret dit non !” *Allez Marseille* No 7 June 2000.

357. [“une grande ville du sud de l’Europe qui doit s’affirmer entre Barcelone et Gènes. Et non pas un port du nord de la Méditerranée ouvert à tous les vents de l’immigration.”] *Allez Marseille* No 7, June 2000. These ideas are an important part of the political rhetoric of the extreme right in Marseilles, but they can also be heard in more mainstream branches of local political debate and public opinion. According to the local journalist José d’Arrigo, for instance, the Algerian migrants “fill the prisons” [“peuplent la prison”] and were to blame for the more general degradation and downfall of the city. What used to be a prestigious boulevard –*le Canebière*– had become “*l’avenue Chich-Kebab*” where only “oriental sandwiches” were sold, and Marseilles seems to have become no

French and anti-Republican”.³⁵⁸ In that particular discursive and political context, answering in the negative to the question “are you in favour of the building of a mosque in Marseilles” simply was not a very attractive thing to do for native, non-Muslim French politicians or citizens.

An important effect of this structuring of the debate was that the residents associations in the North of Marseilles, traditionally one of the crucial organisational actors mobilizing against the building of a mosque, now declared that they also thought “there should be a mosque in Marseilles”. However, as they hastened to add: “but not in a neighbourhood such as ours”. This can, rightly, be understood as an illustration of the discursive strategy known as Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) in which one argues that one is not opposed as such to the construction of a facility but simply objects to the location that has been selected.³⁵⁹ Something else was going on as well, however. In fact, representatives of residents’ associations seemed to agree with the idea that only the extreme right was diametrically opposed to the idea of building a mosque in Marseilles. Hence, declaring in a general way that one agreed that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” was also a way of avoiding a positioning as supporter of the extreme right. The following fragment is taken from an interview with two representatives of two different residents associations in the Northern districts of Marseilles:

R: everybody agrees with the establishment of a mosque. A Grand Mosque, a cultural and religious centre” (...) [have you had the occasion to speak about this with the residents’ association, with the residents? (M.M.)] Of course, of course everyone agrees that the Muslims will have a place of worship and places of worship, not a single one [but is there no one who says..., M.M.]. “Of course, there are those who say, ... no there aren’t any who say, ... yes, there are extremists, namely the Front National. C: but even in our residents association there are people who do not accept that France is multi-religious...”³⁶⁰

For the interviewees the most important discursive technique to enable them to be taken seriously in the debate – and to avoid being immediately put aside as extremists – was to also declare that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles”.³⁶¹

more than “a piece of Mediterranean artificially glued to France” [“un morceau de Méditerranée artificiellement rattaché à la France”] in “Ambiance. A fleur de peau” dossier spéciale, *Valeurs Actuelles* March 2 2001.

358. *Allez Marseille* No 10, January 2001.

359. Representatives of residents associations in Marseilles said, for example, that it was far better to establish the mosque, not in the suburbs where they lived, but in the centre of the city so that it could really be a “symbol of recognition” for the Muslim community. This is also what representatives of the residents association had suggested to members of the CIME who visited them in the Spring of 2001. Interview with Marius Rodriguez and René Colo January 22 2002.

360. [“Alors, tout le monde est d’accord pour la création d’une mosquée. Une grande mosquée, un centre culturel et culturel (...) [Vous avez eu l’occasion d’en parler avec les CIQ, avec les résidents?, M.M.] Bien sur, évidemment tout le monde est d’accord pour que les musulmans aient un lieu de culte et des lieux de cultes, pas un seul [Il n’y a pas de gens qui disent..., M.M.] Biens sur il y en a qui disent, non il n’y en a pas qui dissent, oui, il y a les extrémistes, à savoir le Front national. R: mais même dans notre CIQ il y a des gens qui n’admettent pas que la France est multiculturelle...”] Interview with Marius Rodriguez and René Colo January 22 2002.

361. The interview fragment is also interesting because of the way the representatives of the residents’ association tried simultaneously to reproduce the trope that “there should be a mosque in Marseilles” and to suggest a possible alternative approach to tackle the lack of adequate space for Islamic worship. Instead of thinking about

7.4.3. Development of the project and leadership over the Muslim community

The hearing committee created by the Mayor in June 2001 met with about eighty different people until January 2002: namely, leaders of different political parties, representatives of mosque committees, imams and Muslim associations, representatives of migrants and of residents associations, ethnic businessmen; priests and academic experts. Usually the meetings lasted about 30 minutes in which the members of the hearing committee explained the municipality's ideas and objectives for the Islamic centre, and then invited the visiting guests to elaborate their ideas and opinions. The transcripts of these hearings provide an extremely valuable resource to understand ideas about the mosque and about Islam in Marseilles.³⁶²

Interestingly the idea that the Grand Mosque should solve the lack of adequate prayer spaces seemed to have been abandoned along the way. At stake was a Grand Mosque that would function as a symbol of recognition and that would be coupled to an Islamic cultural centre. In an interview I conducted with Mohamed Laqhila, a representative of the Green Party of Moroccan origin, I enquired whether the problems with the housing of Islamic worship could not better be solved by building a number of mosques in different parts of the city. This, so he argued, was to misunderstand the symbolic meaning of the new mosque and to explain he made a comparison with the Hassan II mosque in Casablanca:

Hassan II wanted to have a symbolical mosque... in Morocco there are mosques in every street, just like there are churches by the way, but he wanted something really symbolic... Marseilles... in fact... we have always fought, I would say for a century, to have such a symbolical mosque... like the other large cities, and also like there are symbolical cathedrals and there are symbolical synagogues.³⁶³

The Islamic cultural centre would also perform very different functions and cater to very different activities than Islamic associations spread out in the city. The new cultural centre would also serve to train imams and to accommodate symposiums, lectures and all kinds of activities that could also be attended by non-Muslims. This narrowing down of the mosque problematic also had consequences for the ways the municipal government and officials envisioned their tasks. The municipality would help the Muslim community to carry out the project that would require administrative, organizational and legal skills. It would also try to offer financial support, for example by giving a plot of land in a long term lease and by subsidising the cultural centre. Most

the building of a single Grand Mosque the interviewee suggests that Muslims in Marseilles should have "places of worship, not a single one". As I will argue the idea of creating a number of more adequate mosques became important in the discussions in Marseilles later on.

362. It became a practice to begin each meeting with three questions: 1) do you agree on the idea of establishing a religious and cultural centre 2) do you think that the suggested location, Saint-Louis, is appropriate and 3) do you agree with the formation of an association that will represent the entire Muslim community and all its components, to carry out this program?

363. ["Hassan II a voulu avoir une mosquée symbolique... au Maroc il y a des mosquées dans toutes les rues, comme il y a des églises d'ailleurs, mais il a voulu quelque chose de vraiment symbolique... Marseille... en fait... on s'est toujours battu depuis je dirai depuis un siècle hein, pour avoir une mosquée symbole... comme les autres grandes villes, et comme d'ailleurs il y a des cathédrales symboliques et comme il y a aussi des synagogues symboliques..."] Interview with Mohammed Laqhila November 21 2001.

of all, at least in this phase, the municipal officials saw it as their task to see to it that a consensual project would be developed that would bring the Muslim community together around “the mosque of Marseilles”.³⁶⁴ Moreover, the Southern French city didn’t want to repeat the mistakes of Paris and Lyons, where the so-called Central Mosques were little frequented by “ordinary Muslims” because they were seen as symbols of a co-opted Muslim elite. In Marseilles, by contrast, the idea was that the future Grand Mosque would really be experienced by the local Muslim community as *their* major house of worship. In other words this project could show how in 2001 a municipality could really contribute to the development of an “Islam of France”.

After a few hearings at the City Hall of Marseilles the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York took place on September 11. Initially Muslim leaders and French politicians alike hurried to declare that Islamic practice in France had nothing to do with Islamic radicalism and international terrorism. But the events did function as catalysts for debates and did inform policy responses, though not in a univocal manner. One of the earliest interpretations was that the attacks had strengthened the case for government support for a peaceful and integrated “Republican Islam”. In this sense, public authorities were called upon to speed up their efforts to accommodate Muslim organisations in France.³⁶⁵

On September 20 the local newspaper *La Provence*³⁶⁶ announced: “The Grand Mosque withstands the attacks ... The anti-American attacks have not slowed down the project, quite the contrary!”. The article quoted Salah Bariki, a member of the hearing committee, saying: “the attacks are one thing, something dramatic, Islam in Marseilles is another thing, that has nothing to do with it”.³⁶⁷ In November 2001 the hearing committee announced that the contours of a broad consensus on major issues could be drawn. There was wide support for the idea itself to build a Grand Mosque and to combine it with a cultural centre, but also for the most probable location, namely a building site in St. Louis located in the Northern part of the city. That location was a large terrain where the major slaughterhouses of Marseilles had been located in the past and that had been used during the past 10 years to cater to the ritual slaughtering of lambs during the yearly Sacrifice Feast. The municipality had announced that it wanted to give the land out in a long-term lease for a symbolical amount. The optimism that was voiced in the local media

364. The municipal officials in Marseilles compared their endeavours with those of other bigger cities such as Lyons and Paris. Only Marseilles was trying to do better in trying to create a Grand Mosque that could carry away the support of the entire Muslim community in the city. This idea became clear when a delegation of municipal officials from Strasbourg visited Marseilles to learn from the experiences in Southern France in 2002. In Strasbourg the project for a central mosque had resulted in increasing disagreements both between the municipal authorities and Muslim representatives and between different groups within the Muslim community itself. A possibility that was being considered was to allow two large mosques to be built. During their visit to Southern France the delegation members could hear that such a development was unthinkable in Marseilles. The municipal officials explained they had chosen to initiate a consultation process that would enable a consensual project for a single Central Mosque to emerge. Interview with Salah Bariki March 21 2002.

365. For a discussion of the impact of 9/11 on Muslims in Western Europe and in France in particular, see Vaisse and Laurence 2006.

366. The journal *La Provence* is a result of a merger of the former newspapers *Le Méridional* and *Le Provençal*.

367. [“Les attentats c’est une chose, dramatique, l’Islam à Marseille c’en est une autre qui n’a rien à voir.”] Salah Bariki in *La Provence* September 20 2001. When the president of the En Nasr Mosque Committee, Bachir Dahmani, was heard on September 19 he stated that he “clearly and totally condemned extremism”. Claude Bertrand replied that there should not be any connection between the events in the United States and the creation of the Islamic centre in Marseilles.

turned out to have been premature. Already in the Fall of 2001 major cracks in the seemingly widely shared consensus had begun to appear. Two years later it seemed that the whole project had come to a standstill. What had happened?

Actors and coalitions and Islam in Marseilles

Part of the explanation of what happened between 2001 and 2003 – an explanation that has been well developed in the French media and in several articles – points to the struggles over interests and power between two factions of Muslim organisations in Marseilles seeking to gain control over the Regional Muslim Council and the mosque project.³⁶⁸ The faction that would succeed in controlling the two new Islamic institutions would *ipse facto* become the most important interlocutor for Muslim affairs in Marseilles. It would also enable this group to build a beautiful mosque and possibly to set up an imam training program, not to mention the many financial gains as a result of levying taxes on certified halal products and receiving municipal subsidies for cultural activities. Because the stakes were so high, the governments of North African countries became increasingly involved, notably seeking to influence the outcomes of the elections for the new regional and national Councils for the Muslim Religion. The Moroccan and Algerian consulates in Marseilles intervened directly and tried to support their respective allies in France.

There were also ethnic, generational and denominational differences that divided the Muslim population and Muslim organisations. Younger generations of Muslim, often better educated and fluent in French, were challenging the predominant position in matters of community affairs of first generation members of mosque organisations and so-called “working class imams” such as Dahmani. Islamic associations representing Muslims of Comorian, West African and Moroccan origin challenged the dominance of the Algerian organisations and representatives. There was the ongoing struggles between those mosque organisations that were affiliated with the Paris Mosque (and thereby with the Algerian government) and other mosque organisations that either positioned themselves as “independent” or that were affiliated with other Islamic federations such as the FNMF, supported by the Moroccan state, or the UOIF. Finally, there was a group of self-styled “secular Muslims”, mostly Franco-Maghrebis who had been active in the secular immigrant organisations and in local civic society and politics, who argued that the organisation of Islam in France should not merely be the affair of “religious officials” (*les religieux*).³⁶⁹ These “secular Muslims” presented themselves more and more as viable

368. See for example Cesari 2005b; Geisser 2001; and Geisser and Zemouri 2007.

369. This self-positioning plays on the meanings the word “lay” and “secular” that can both be translated as “*laïc*” in French. It can be used to speak of someone who is “a lay person” (*un laïc*) and therefore does not have a religious function, for instance because he is not a priest or a Rabbi. In addition, the expression can be used to refer to someone who does not practice his or her religion actively, for example in speaking of oneself as “I am laic, I do not practice” [“je suis laïc, je ne pratique pas”]. In the context of discussions on Islam in France, however, the term is also used to speak of people who are said to have a “Muslim cultural background” (*de culture musulmane*). In the context of discussions on the building of a mosque in Marseilles, people self-styled themselves as “secular Muslims” to demand a say in the project as members of “the Muslim community”. The role of the “secular Muslims” in the municipal hearing committee – Myriam Salah-Eddine, Tahar Rahmani and Salah Bariki – was fiercely criticised by others who demanded a say in the dossier. Bariki and Rahmani were ironically portrayed as people who “had never seen a mosque from the inside”, but now occupied a key position in the debate as self-styled “secular Muslims”. Interview Mohamed Laqhila November 21 2001. See also Mas 2006.

partners for municipal authorities, because they were more “liberal” and also more experienced in setting up activities and managing associations than the religious officials.

In the summer of 2001 these underlying divergences and struggles had resulted in emergence of two factions of Muslim associations. There were those who organised around the mosque at La Capelette and the other mosques that were affiliated to the FRMSF that was presided over by Bachir Dahmani and supported by the Paris Mosque. These institutions claimed to represent a silent majority of mostly middle-aged and older Muslims in Marseilles who wanted to practice their religion in a calm and respectful way. This group had reconciled itself with the “mufti” who was said to be a talented “intellectual” and a “courageous theologian” working on the “reform of Islam” and who could help to encourage young generations of Muslims in Marseilles to choose a more “liberal” interpretation of Islam.³⁷⁰ This faction had created a new platform in June 2001 called the Collective of Muslim Associations of Marseilles (*Collectif des Associations Musulmanes de Marseille*, CAMM) (Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 246).

The other faction consisted of Muslim associations and individuals who had joined forces around a so-called Council of Imams of Greater Marseilles (*Conseil des Imams de Marseille et des Environs*, CIME) that had been founded in 1999. The CIME presented itself as a gathering of younger imams of different ethnic origins (Algerian, Moroccan, Comoro) who wanted to exchange their religious knowledge and cooperate among themselves. The platform was to help “to allow the Muslims of greater Marseilles to have the premises, the structures and the equipments necessary for the practice of Islam, in the best conditions”.³⁷¹ The CIME presented itself as an independent and local organisation of educated second generation Muslims, born and raised in Marseilles. Others, however, questioned the independence of the CIME and said the platform was being supported by the Moroccan consulate.

By November 2001 the rivalry between the two factions had become well known in the local media. The competition between the two factions had not only become more public, it had also become more vicious. The group around the CAMM tried to present itself as defenders of a liberal “Islam of France”. Soheib Bencheikh spoke of the CIME as a group of “students who have started to preach because of a lack of imams” and he warned of the dangers of radicalism. Imams who were not qualified and educated tried to “compensate their lack of knowledge with a certain rigorist interpretation of Islam”.³⁷² The members of the CIME, from their side, insisted on the need for Islam in Marseilles to develop independently from the Paris Mosque. They argued that the time had come for the municipality to recognise the newly emerging grass roots organisations that reflected the actual ethnic and denominational diversity of Islam in Marseilles.

370. The “mufti” was represented in these terms in an issue of the French weekly *Marianne* of January 7 2001.

371. [“Ouvrer pour permettre aux musulmans de Marseille et ses environs d’avoir les édifices, les structures et les installations nécessaires à l’exercice, dans les meilleurs conditions, du culte musulman”] Brochure CIME, January 2001. The CIME claimed to represent the vast majority of the imams working in the different mosques in Marseilles and surrounding cities, such as Aix-en-Provence. However, most of the active members were affiliated with the Mosque near the Flea market and with the Al Qods mosque in the city centre. In 2000, one year after its founding, all the imams who were affiliated with the Paris Mosque had left the council.

372. HMMIC July 12 2001 p.10 and interview with Soheib Bencheikh March 16 2002. In view of possibilities to develop the mosque project both factions set up new organisational structures in 2002. These new platform organisation served to demonstrate that they were able to bring together a large number of local Muslim associations and qualified individuals. The leaders of the CIME created the *Coordination des Musulmans de Marseille* (COMUM). The FRMSF created the earlier mentioned *Collectif des Associations Musulmans de Marseille* (CAMM).

Municipal officials wanted to avoid choosing between the two factions. The rivalry between the CIME and the CAMM was all the more regrettable because the hearings had revealed that a wide consensus existed both on the idea of creating a mosque and on the kind of centre that should be built. At least that was the way members of the hearing committee represented their conclusions to the media. This way of representing the problems was certainly not incorrect, but it had as a correlate the suggestion that there was in the end *only* a struggle of influence and interests between two factions. However, the competition between the two factions was linked to diverging understandings of the mosque as a symbol and on the functioning of the Islamic centre. These divergences became all the more important as they were linked to differing ideas about the incorporation of Islam in Marseilles and in France, an issue that became even more important in 2002 and 2003.

7.4.4. Disagreements about the character of the Islamic Cultural and Religious Centre of Marseilles: symbolical role and the functions of the cultural centre

Even though earlier on I had distinguished between three different views on the future mosque of Marseilles, to wit pluralist, Republican-assimilationist and Mediterranean views, the “Mediterranean view” with its emphasis on Arab-Islamic culture was not very prominent during the hearings and often came to be subsumed under the Republican-assimilationist view. I will therefore focus on the pluralist and Republican-assimilationist views. I will focus on two key issues: the first being the precise ways the Grand Mosque would function as a symbol in the city, the other being the ideas about the purposes of the future Islamic cultural centre.

When the hearing committee started its activities there seemed to be an agreement that the future Grand Mosque was to be understood as the fulfilment of what Bruno Étienne had called “a symbolical obligation”.³⁷³ Only a beautiful and architecturally prestigious purpose-built mosque could accomplish this symbolical function.³⁷⁴ The Grand Mosque should become a symbol of the city of Marseilles and a “*Mosquée marseillaise*”.³⁷⁵ However, underneath this agreement that the mosque would and should function as a symbol, there were very different ideas about what exactly it would symbolize.

Pluralism and recognition: a symbol for the Muslims of Marseilles

In interviews, representatives of the CIME explained that they had decided to become involved in the mosque dossier primarily to avoid a repetition of the events in 1989 and 1996. In the past, individuals such as Mustapha Slimani and Soheib Bencheikh had more or less hijacked the discussions in Marseilles, by presenting and publicly advertising projects of their own, which

373. HMMIC, September 20 2001 p.9.

374. [“Il faut que le projet architectural ne soit pas mediocre”] HMMIC June 26 2001 p.4. The aim was to create a “symbolical and representative place” and to make the “corresponding architectural gesture” [“lieu symbolique representative et le geste architectural adapté”] and to make the building into “a place that can be seen”. HMMIC, July 5 2001 p.7; HMMIC July 12 2001 p.8.

375. [“il est temps que la Ville de Marseille ait une mosquée”] HMMIC September 19 2001 p.14.

had been developed without much consultation with the Muslims in Marseilles. The secretary of the CIME stated in 2001:

First, a citywide study should be made on the real needs, and on the place where Muslims are concentrated. The council of imams is not in favour of a “symbolical mosque” in Marseilles, which would require a large budget and which would lead to financial waste. We are in favour of a Grand Mosque.³⁷⁶

Members of the CIME criticized the Mosque of Paris and of Lyons which were examples of “symbolical mosques” that were well seen by French authorities and media but little frequented by ordinary Muslim worshippers.³⁷⁷ The Grand Mosque of Marseilles, by contrast, should become an “expression of faith and spiritual enrichment for all”.³⁷⁸ For the local Muslim community it would function as the “mosque of reference” (*la mosquée référence*), where the end of the Ramadan would be celebrated or where the most important prayer for the Sacrifice Feast would take place. It might even become “a place of pilgrimage for the residents of the Côte d’Azur”.³⁷⁹ The president of the Comorian associations, Mr. Mahamoud, spoke of “the fact of having a symbolical place, which is what we are all expecting, will help us to unite”.³⁸⁰ Another prominent member of the CIME said:

the concern of the council of imams is to underline that this is a very symbolical place... in which all the Muslims, whatever their nationality, their religious philosophy, their preference, will come together, will identify with...³⁸¹

The CIME portrayed the history of Islam in Marseilles as a long sequence of attempts to manipulate and control the Muslim population. This time the building of a Grand Mosque would be in the hands of the Muslims of Marseilles themselves. According to the CIME it was crucial that the project be “fundamentally *Marseillais* and those who carry it out must necessarily be *Marseillais*”.³⁸² This emphasis stressed the need for local Muslims to be in control of the project as a way of saying that control of the Paris Mosque and of the Algerian government was not

376. [“Il faut d’abord faire une étude sur les besoins réels au niveau de la ville, sur les lieux de concentration des musulmans. Le Conseil des imams n’est pas favorable à une ‘mosquée-symbole’ à Marseille, qui exigerait un gros budget et qui entraînerait des gâchis financiers. Nous sommes favorable à une Grande Mosquée”] (Mohammed Yassine cited in Geisser 2001).

377 Interview with Azzedine Aïnouche, March 4 2002.

378. [“expression d’une foi et d’enrichissement spirituel pour tous”] Lettre du CIME February 2002.

379. HMMIC July 12 2001 p.7.

380. [“Le fait d’avoir un lieu symbolique, ce que nous attendons tous, va nous aider à nous unir”] HMMIC July 26 2001 p.5.

381. [“Par l’édification de ce projet c’est notre Communauté qui pourra se reconnaître et se faire reconnaître (...) une symbole d’intégration de notre religion.. que c’est une religion qui est accepté (...) la préoccupation du conseil des imams c’est de dire c’est un lieu très symbolique.. dans lequel tous les musulmans quelque soit leur nationalité, leur philosophie religieuse, leur sensibilité, se retrouvent, s’identifient...”]. Interview with Azzedine Aïnouche, March 4 2002.

382. [“Le projet est fondamentalement Marseillais et les porteurs doivent être nécessairement Marseillais”] HMMIC July 12 2001 p.5.

acceptable. It was also a critique directed at the “secular Muslims” who wanted to become involved because of political, commercial and other interests without being much concerned about Muslim religious affairs. Finally, the members of the CIME were also distancing themselves from the concept of a “French Islam” if that came down to a direct involvement of the French state in the administration of Islamic institutions in France. To the hearing committee members of the CIME said they also were in favour of “an Islam that was fully compatible with French law”. The municipal hearing committee inquired whether they favoured the creation of a French Islam, which would resemble “French Judaism” or “French Catholicism”. Confronted with these questions, the president of the CIME, Mourad Zerfaoui, questioned the concept “French Islam” and instead suggested that the approach of the local imams in the CIME was done as part of a “global approach” and an “Islam of citizens”.³⁸³

Republican-assimilation and modernity: a symbol of an “Islam of France”

For many people, the Grand Mosque in Marseilles should become a symbol of the willingness of Muslims to choose for an “Islam of France”. The president of the federation of residents associations in Marseilles argued:

To obtain money from abroad is not a problem, if there will be a problem that will be because of an ideological orientation of the mosque in a direction that will not be respectful of French laws (...) Islam should invent for itself a way of being Muslim in France, like the Catholic Church has done in Korea, in Tanzania or elsewhere.³⁸⁴

The director of the Mayor’s Cabinet responded in the following way to this idea:

... we simply think that there should be a French Islam. We try to give Islam what the believers have asked for, for so long. For me, the problem is whether the Muslims of Marseilles are sufficiently mature to know what they want.³⁸⁵

The Muslims of Marseilles were thus invited to show their “maturity” and the ability to know “what they wanted”, but on the other hand it was already clear that the only viable option was for them to choose for the creation of “a French Islam”. Once the Muslims had made this choice the city of Marseilles would, so to speak, “reward” their efforts and grant them the possibility of building a Grand Mosque. According to the “mufti” Bencheikh the Grand Mosque would be:

383. [“une démarche globale, c’est plutôt un Islam Citoyen”] HMMIC July 12 2001 p.6.

384 [“Obtenir de l’argent de l’extérieur n’est pas un problème, s’il y a problème ce sera à cause de l’orientation de la Mosquée, dans un sens qui ne soit pas respectueux des Lois Françaises. Nous sommes en France et il faut respecter les Lois de la France. l’Islam doit s’inventer une façon d’être Musulman en France, comme l’Eglise Catholique l’a fait en Corée, en Tanzanie ou ailleurs”] HMMIC September 22 2001 p.8.

385 [“Nous pensons tout simplement qu’il faut un islam Français. Nous essayons de lui donner ce que ses fidèles réclament depuis si longtemps. Pour moi le problème est-ce que les Musulmans de Marseille sont suffisamment adultes pour savoir ce qu’ils veulent”] HMMIC September 20 2001 p.8.

...the open door to the entire modernity, it is Islam that is taking root here, it is Islam in a French way. This is the idea that we are currently developing ... we ask for the Republic's recognition. A recognition of the Muslims whose French-ness is still fragile. Hence the importance of this project, to consolidate their French-ness. We want to bring Islam out into open daylight with this mosque, out of the obscurity and away from the forces of darkness, and go towards the light to organise our religion.³⁸⁶

The “mufti” also underlined that it was necessary to build a mosque that was “futurist and modern”.³⁸⁷ Much like the project of 1996 the kind of mosque architecture the “mufti” had in mind served to illustrate that Muslims in Marseilles were willing and able to take their distance from cultural and ethnic traditions”.³⁸⁸ The “mufti” explained that building a new mosque would help in the struggle against “the forces of darkness” (*l’obscurantisme*):

We want to preach our religion in transparency. We don’t want to teach Muslims in secret, we also want to do it, like in Paris, in the presence of non Muslims who will, by the way, have chairs to sit on inside the mosque so as to listen to the sermon.³⁸⁹

The idea of making Islam more “transparent” and observable was also linked to possibilities of civil society and municipal authorities to oversee what was going on in the Grand Mosque. Because public authorities would become implicated in the development and financing of the centre they were also thus entitled to a “*droit de regard*” on the management of the future centre. This was a good development in the eyes of the “secular Muslims”, because as one of the members of the CORAI observed: “one knows the perverse and dangerous effects when Islam

386 [“La Grande Mosquée de Marseille c’est la porte ouverte à toute la modernité, c’est l’Islam qui s’ancre ici, c’est l’Islam à la Française, c’est ce que nous développons comme idée à l’heure actuelle (...) nous demandons une reconnaissance par la République. Une reconnaissance des musulmans dont la francité est fragile d’où l’intérêt avec ce projet de consolider leur francité. Nous voulons à travers cette mosquée sortir l’Islam au grand jour, sortir de l’obscurantisme et aller dans la lumière pour organiser notre culte”] HMMIC July 12 2001 p.2.

387 Cited in “Grande Mosquée: tout n’est pas fait” in *La Marseillaise* September 7 2001.

388 Similar ideas about what would be an appropriate mosque architecture in France were articulated by Minister Chevènement during the Consultation on Islam in France. The architecture of mosque buildings functioned as a kind of test case of the willingness and ability of Muslims in France to leave some of their cultural roots behind and to show respect for prevailing values and aesthetic norms in French society. According to the Minister of the Interior, Muslims in France should make an effort “not only to respect our laws, but also to integrate the construction of their mosques in the landscape of our cities” [“non seulement de respecter nos lois, mais aussi d’intégrer la construction de leurs mosquées au paysage de nos villes”] Chevènement cited in *Le Monde* February 19 2000. A report on Islamic houses of worship mentioned that if Muslims reached a certain level of integration, they would be able to “imagine their religious spaces without any cultural reference that is imported, notably from the Maghreb” [“imaginer leurs espaces culturels indépendamment de toute référence culturelle importée notamment du Maghreb”] in Rapport d’étape groupe de travail No 1. For complete reference see above. See also “L’image des mosquées de France. L’enjeu architectural et urbain des lieux de culte musulmans est fondamental” in *Libération* December 22 2004.

389 [“Nous voulons prêcher notre religion dans la transparence. Nous ne voulons pas enseigner aux musulmans en cachette, nous souhaitons le faire également, comme à Paris, en présence des non musulmans qui d’ailleurs bénéficient de chaises pour s’asseoir à l’intérieur de la Mosquée afin d’écouter le prêche”] HMMIC July 12 2001 p.3.

is not mastered”.³⁹⁰ A Communist representative of the municipal council insisted that: “there should be guarantees for the future, so that it will not one day become a place where women are excluded. We should avoid fundamentalism”.³⁹¹

The Islamic Cultural Centre

When it came to the ideas about the Islamic cultural centre, similar divergence between a pluralist view and a Republican and assimilationist view existed. All stakeholders were aware that by creating a cultural centre there would be more possibilities for public authorities – the municipality, but also the regional government and the state – to financially contribute to the costs of accommodation and activities. The mosque building and the association that would administer it would fall under the 1905 law and therefore they could benefit from financial compensations such as an exemption from real estate taxes and compensation for maintenance costs.

The pluralist view: an Islamic cultural centre for Muslims

Some Muslim religious leaders were sceptical about the appropriateness of speaking of an “Islamic religious and cultural centre” (*un centre culturel et culturel musulman*) and saw it as a way to hide to the outside world that a real mosque was going to be built. According to a representative of the African community, Moussa Koite Fili, there was no reason for such a strategy of camouflage, because the mosque was “an honour for Marseilles”.³⁹² The rector of the mosque in Rue Bon Pasteur, Hadj Alili, downrightly rejected the idea of creating a “cultural centre”. According to him, the underlying strategy of the municipal government was to engage non-Muslims and “secular Muslims” in the project and to use them as auxiliaries in its efforts to control Islam in Marseilles.³⁹³ One of the West African imams made a similar point during the hearings and insisted that the project should primarily be about the establishment of a religious place in Marseilles: “We want to emphasise the spiritual value of this mosque ... these

390 [“on connaît l’effet pervers et dangereux quand l’Islam n’est pas maîtrisé”] Benhagoug, HMMIC July 12 2001 p.11.

391 [“Il faut avoir des garanties pour demain, il ne faut pas qu’un jour cela soit un lieu d’exclusion des femmes. Il faut éviter de l’intégrisme”] HMMIC July 5 2001 p.5.

392 [“Il faut appeler un chat un chat, un Centre Culturel et Culturel est-ce que ce n’est pas une façon de cacher l’arbre par la forêt. L’utilité de la Mosquée c’est un honneur pour Marseille”] HMMIC September 20 2001 p.2. The members of the hearing committee repeatedly argued there was a strategic reason to avoid speaking only of a mosque: “Why do we call this project the Cultural and Religious Centre and not the Grand Mosque (...). If this project would be called “Grand Mosque” the City could not be able to give a centime (...) It has to be possible to find the necessary funds. And if the public institutions cannot give you anything because it is exclusively about creating a Grand Mosque and not about a cultural place, then you will not be able to finance this project.” [“Pourquoi nous appelons ce projet Centre Culturel et Culturel et pas Grande Mosquée? (...) Si ce projet s’appelle Grande Mosquée la Ville ne pourra pas donner un centime (...) Il faudra bien arriver à trouver les fonds et si les institutions ne peuvent rien vous donner car il s’agit uniquement d’une Grande Mosquée et pas d’un lieu culturel vous n’arriverez pas à financer ce projet.”] HMMIC September 20 2001 p.5.

393 Mohand Alili, HMMIC July 12 2001 p.7. The father of Mohand Alili, Hadj Alili, had raised similar objections to the mosque project developed by Mustafa Slimani in 1989. At the time the rector of the mosque at Rue Bon Pasteur had insisted that a mosque was not “a museum” and that a religious place should be kept at a distance from all kinds of political struggles.

political considerations about having a say in society ... that is not the role of religion, nor of the mosque”.³⁹⁴

According to the CIME, the cultural centre should cater to activities with a religious connotation, such as religious instructions, expositions and Arab language classes. The Islamic centre should become a key element in the community infrastructure of Muslims in Marseilles. The council of imams objected to the idea that the Islamic cultural centre would become a place where all kinds of “cultural events” would take place, which would only remotely be related to the “Muslim or Arab world”. As Azzedine Aïnouche said:

This should be about religion... if cultural centre will start signifying that it is something with “music, ... rap... Arab things”, no!, then we withdraw, we will then no longer want any part ... this is supposed to be a religious place.³⁹⁵

The Republican-assimilationist view: a cultural centre to educate French Muslims

Other speakers had very different ideas about the new Islamic cultural centre. The director of the Mayor’s Cabinet, Claude Bertrand, said: “The mosque that we are speaking of is also a cultural place, which for me, isn’t limited to the Koran; the Arab Andalusia culture should also be included”.³⁹⁶ Others argued that what was needed was “a Muslim Library, and a Koranic school so that Muslims are well trained”.³⁹⁷ A member of the municipal council thought that the cultural centre should also contribute to critical reflection, intellectual exchange and scholarship among Muslims in Marseilles. It should be about : “...cultural exchange, creating links with the main library, with the *Pôle d’Aix* (i.e. the university, M.M.). A place of worship for the Muslims and an information centre for everyone, corresponding to the spirit of our city”.³⁹⁸ Tahar Rahmani, one of the “secular Muslims” who was a member of the hearing committee, summarised what kind of cultural centre should be created: “everybody would like to have a small *Institut du Monde Arabe* like in Paris. A cultural Arab-Muslim centre with a social and cultural utility”.³⁹⁹

The image of the cultural centre was also informed by the will to avoid “fundamentalists” deciding on what forms of cultural expression were acceptably “Islamic”. Orthodox Muslims were to be prevented from banning what they presumably considered inadmissible, such as art, open discussion, the participation of women and music. Some people suggested using the cultural centre as a way to support the development of a liberal Islam in Marseilles. Since

394 [“On met en avant la valeur spirituelle de cette Mosquée ... ces considérations politiciennes pour revendiquer des places au niveau de la société, ce n’est pas le rôle de la religion ni de la Mosquée en particulier”] HMMIC September 20 2001 p.3.

395 Interview with Azzedine Aïnouche, March 4 2002.

396 [“la Mosquée dont on parle c’est aussi un lieu culturel qui pour moi ne se limite pas au Coran, il y faut également la culturel arabo andalouse...”] HMMIC November 21 2001 p.3.

397 [“une Bibliothèque Musulmane et une École Coranique pour que les Musulmans soient bien formés”] HMMIC July 20 2001 p.2.HMM

398 [“l’échange culturel, nouer des passerelles avec la grand bibliothèque, avec le Pôle d’Aix, un lieu de prière pour les musulmans et un Centre de ressources pour tout le monde ce qui correspondra à l’esprit de notre Cité...”] Annick Boët, Parti Communiste, HMMIC July 5 2001 p.5.

399 HMMIC November 21 2001 p.12.

the municipality would subsidize at least part of the cultural activities it would also be entitled to oversee and inspect them. This could also perhaps apply to religious instruction where, as Bertrand argued, “excesses” (*dérives*) should also be avoided. Thus “the Koran school should preferably be provided for by the cultural institute and not by the religious one”.⁴⁰⁰ Another member of the hearing committee, Salah Bariki, said that the publicly financed Islamic cultural centre could help to take the wind out of the sails of private initiatives for Koran schools and multipurpose Islamic centres. He mentioned the example of the training centre for imams that had been created by the UOIF in Nièvre:

At the Koran training institute in Nièvre 3% of the books are written in French and everything has been paid for from abroad. If tomorrow we are confronted with a private centre, where non-Muslims are not welcome to come to the cultural centre, nobody would be able to intervene anymore.⁴⁰¹

Creating a large Islamic cultural institute sponsored with public funds would encourage Muslims to make use of French learning materials or to develop these, and it thereby also would function as an obstacle to the strategies of foreign organisations to indoctrinate Muslims in France. Finally, it was important that “religious officials” (*des religieux*) would not dominate the administration of the cultural centre. It would be better if “secular Muslims” and “actors of civil society” would play a leading role.

7.4.5. The future of Islam in France and re-framing divergences between Muslim factions in Marseilles

Between November 2001 and April 2002 the negotiations around the future mosque were coming to a standstill. However, the difficulties that had arisen were not primarily interpreted as related to the differences between competing views on the future project or as a result of competing views on the development of Islam in France, i.e. along lines similar to my distinction between “pluralist views” and “Republican-assimilationist views”. The members of the hearing committee, the local media and academics tended to argue that the deadlock was a result of the rivalry between the two factions, each seeking to protect their interests and prestige, and with the consulates of Algeria and Morocco and the Paris Mosque seeking to use their influence behind the scenes.

However, it became clear that the hearing committee distinguished between actors who were in favour of developing a more liberal “French Islam” and actors who wanted to sustain the relatively isolated position of Muslims in Marseilles. In an interview in April 2002 the director of the Mayor’s Cabinet, Claude Bertrand, looking back on the hearings and the meetings with Muslim representatives, tried to explain who the advocates and opponents of the mosque were:

400 [“Il me semble si cela est possible que l’École Coranique doit pouvoir être hébergée par la structure culturelle plutôt que culturelle”] HMMIC December 12 2001 p.6.

401 [“Dans le Nièvre à l’Institut de Formation Coranique 3% des livres sont écrit en Français et tout a été payé par l’Etranger. Si demain on se retrouve avec un Centre Privé et s’ils ne veulent pas que des non musulmans viennent au Centre Culturel personne ne pourra intervenir. En revanche si la Mairie ou d’autres collectivités sont impliquées et ont un point de vue ce sera une garantie de plus de sérénité”] HMMIC October 25 2001 p.5.

...the more a Muslim was integrated in the city, the more he wanted this sort of testimony, that he participated well in the life of the city. The less he was integrated, the less he wanted the mosque, because he wanted to stay in his own small group [and how have you yourself made this distinction in the course of these discussions, between those who were more integrated in Marseilles and those ...? M.M.] One can see it very clearly, it is obvious... the one who speaks in Arabic is usually against the mosque and the one who speaks in French is in favour of the mosque.⁴⁰²

It was quite clear that the hearing committee had developed a fondness for the Muslim faction that articulated – what I have called – a Republican-assimilationist view on the future centre. Especially the “mufti” Bencheikh had made a good impression:

...in the whole group of personalities whom we have interviewed, there is one Muslim that has clearly distinguished himself, that is Soheib Bencheikh. He has distinguished himself very clearly, he has a modern vision, he expresses himself perfectly, he has a structured vision of Islam, and he is without doubt the interlocutor who is easiest to distinguish from the others, but his problem is that he is not accepted by the other Muslims...⁴⁰³

The fact that Bencheikh was so obviously “not accepted by the other Muslims” made it hardly imaginable for the municipality to simply impose the unpopular “mufti” as their privileged partner to create the Grand Mosque. This became abundantly clear when members of the hearing committee made a slip of the tongue and suggested in the local media that it was likely that the CAMM would be invited to develop the project. This led to an immediate reaction of members of the CIME. They wrote an open letter to the Mayor in February 2002 in which they accused members of the hearing committee – in particular the “secular Muslims” Bariki and Rahmani – of manipulation and partiality.⁴⁰⁴ Municipal officials hurried to declare that the CIME continued to be seen as a potential partner as well and that it would be best if all groups would work together. Not much later the municipal government decided to postpone further decisions until after the upcoming presidential and legislative elections in the Spring.

Endgame?

The Spring of 2002 was a period of great political agitation in France. This was largely due to the unexpected defeat of the socialist candidate Lionel Jospin by the extreme right leader

402 [“au plus le musulman était intégré à la ville de Marseille au plus il souhaitait ce témoignage en quelque sorte, qu’il participait à la vie de la cité et au moins il était intégré au moins il souhaitait la mosquée parce qu’il voulait rester dans son petit groupe... [et comment dans ces discussions vous avez eu, comment pour vous même vous avez faite cette distinction entre ceux qui étaient mieux intégré à Marseille et ceux qui venaient..., M.M.] On le voit très bien... c’est très clair à voir... celui qui parle en arabe est contre généralement la mosquée celui qui parle en français et pour la mosquée”] Interview with Claude Bertrand April 17 2002.

403 [“dans toute la groupe des personnalités que nous avons consulté il y a un musulman qui s’est dégagé clairement, c’est Soheib Bencheikh, il se dégage du haut, il a une vision moderne, il s’exprime parfaitement, il a une vision structuré de l’Islam, et c’est sans doute l’interlocuteur qui se dégage le plus facilement, son problème c’est qu’il n’est pas accepté par les autres musulmans”] Interview with Claude Bertrand April 17 2002.

404 See “Lettre ouverte au sénateur maire de Marseille Jean Claude Gaudin” CIME February 2002.

Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections on April 21st. In October 2002, the Mayor of Marseilles invited different “members of the Muslim community” to the City Hall in an attempt to create a consensus and to set up an association in view of building the new mosque. That meeting did not produce the hoped for results. It appeared as if an historic opportunity to build a Grand Mosque risked being thwarted because of ongoing factionalism within “the Muslim community”. That was all the more deplorable because an opinion-poll issued by the municipality and published in November showed that 57% of the population of Marseilles was now in favour of the building of a Grand Mosque.⁴⁰⁵ In December the Mayor decided to take affairs in his own hands and appointed Salah Bariki, a well known “secular Muslim” and member of the hearing committee, as the municipal executive in charge of the mosque project.⁴⁰⁶ A month later, in January 2003, 33 people were invited to the City Hall in order to constitute a new association that would further develop the project. Soheib Bencheikh was to become the leading figure in this association, but the board would also include Bachir Dahmani, nine female members, a sociologist and several “representatives of civil society”. The Mayor had also invited three members of the CIME to participate, but these did not include any representative of the mosque at the Flee Market nor its president Zerfaoui. The CIME declined the invitation, arguing that the new association had not been created in a transparent and democratic way. Moreover, according to the CIME, it would be far easier to establish an executive committee on the basis of the outcomes of the elections for a regional Muslim council of the Bouches-du-Rhône, which were to take place in April 2003.

Organising Islam in France: the creation of the CFCM

As discussed earlier, the Consultation on Islam in France resulted in taking very concrete steps to develop representative bodies. Most important in this regard was the creation of a Regional Muslim Council of the Provence-Alpes-Côtes-d’Azur (PACA) region. This meant that the attempts at institutionalising Islam in Marseilles were no longer a local issue, but were entangled with governing strategies and policies at the national level. These entered a decisive phase when Nicolas Sarkozy became Minister of the Interior in May 2002.

Sarkozy’s approach to the creation of the French Council of the Muslim Religion was a combination of Gallican and Concorditarian strategies, and it earned him the name of the Napoleon of Islam in France (Bowen 2006: 100). The approach towards the creation of Islam institutions was pluralist in the sense that it aimed at overcoming the older strategy of almost exclusive cooperation with the Paris Mosque. French authorities were now inclined to recognise the plurality of organisations that represented Muslims. On the other hand, and this was the Gallican and Concorditarian element, if the state would become more directly involved in the creation of Muslim institutions this created opportunities for French authorities to insist that Muslim leaders declare their support for key constitutional principles such as secularism, equal treatment and religious freedom. Muslim organisations that wanted to participate in the consultation on Islam in France were asked to sign a declaration concerning the “rights and duties of

405 Opinion poll by SOFRES held between 15-18 November 2002 entitled “Marseilles: attentes et satisfaction à l’égard de l’action municipale”. 39% of the people who were interviewed said they were against the building of a mosque.

406 “La mairie de Marseille reprend en main le projet de mosquée” in *Le Monde* November 30 2002.

Muslims in France” (Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 81ff.). In so doing Muslim representative who decided to play by the rules of the game would affirm that in France religion should be subordinated to the State and its legal order (Bowen 2007: 1008).

Sarkozy insisted that a broad range of Muslim denominations and “schools of thought” would participate, but he tried to organise the formation of the future Muslim Council in such a way that “moderate” voices would be represented. A key challenge thereby was to see to it that the largest federations, the FNMF and the UOIF, would participate in the council without dominating it.⁴⁰⁷ The formation of the first French Council of the Muslim Religion in early May 2003 showed that, for the time being, the mixing of Gallican and Concorditarian governing strategies in the intentional creation of an “Islam of France” seemed to be paying off. The new CFCM bureau included representatives of the major Muslim organisations as well as of the five major mosques and Soheib Bencheikh and Dounia Bouzar as “qualified personalities” (Bowen 2006: 58). A Muslim body had been created that could be said to mirror the diversity of Islam in France and that was created in a “democratic” way. On the other hand, French officials had been closely involved and had orchestrated the process in such a way that the outcomes of the Consultation would be acceptable, especially for the Paris Mosque and for French authorities. Dalil Boubakeur became the president the Council while Bechari (FNMF) and Alaoui (UOIF) were appointed as vice-presidents.⁴⁰⁸

...and in Marseilles

The creation of a national Islamic representative body created pressures on other institutional levels. In the PACA region, for example, the Regional Council for the Muslim Religion (CRCM) would supposedly become the interlocutor for regional and municipal authorities. During the elections for the Regional Muslim Council an independent list headed by Mourad Zerfaoui, imam of the Al-Islah Mosque Committee and president of the CIME, collected the majority of the votes. This was at the cost of a defeat of the Paris Mosque’s list, on which Bachir Dahmani and Soheib Bencheikh had presented themselves.⁴⁰⁹ Mourad Zerfaoui was elected as the president of the Bureau of the new regional Muslim council.⁴¹⁰

However, in the course of 2003, municipal officials had more and more outspokenly sought to disqualify the representatives of the Al-Islah mosque as “fundamentalists”. Whereas in 2001 the CIME was still looked at as a council that simply represented local imams, it was now being associated with Islamic radicalism. That image could very easily be reproduced in the media, especially by national and international media who were less informed about the ongoing power struggles in Marseilles. Thus in April 2003 an American journalist of the New York Times wrote:

407 The main federations, including the Paris Mosque, the UOIF and the FNMF had signed an agreement in July 2001 in view of the creation of the Muslim Council (Geisser and Zemouri 2007: 65).

408 See Bowen 2006: 55ff.

409 The independent list obtained 41,72% of the votes, followed by the list of the Federation of the Paris Mosque that collected 29,85% and the list “Entente des Musulmans de la region PACA” with 28,42%. See “l’Islam marseillais en pleine mutation” in *La Provence* June 18 2003.

410 “L’Islam marseillais en pleine mutation” in *La Provence* June 18 2003.

One of the city's main advocates for the grand mosque is Soheib Bencheikh, an Algerian cleric who is clean-shaven and wears a suit and tie. He wants a big, beautiful mosque that will teach what he calls "true Islam", not distorted "radicalism". Alongside will be a cultural center (*sic*) that he says will show "the beautiful face of Islam" with poetry readings, concerts and dance performances. In recent years, however, Marseille has witnessed a surge in fundamentalist clerics who preach a strict interpretation of the Koran that opposes activities like music and dancing. One increasingly popular movement is led by Mourad Zerfaoui, a bearded Algerian biologist who wears clerical garb when he preaches and lay clothes when he teaches (...) Zerfaoui's followers try to lure teenage boys toward the cause of conservative Islam.⁴¹¹

Municipal officials would now begin to use and nourish this representation of the CIME as a collection of fundamentalist, if not radical, young Muslims. Shortly after the formation of the bureau of the Regional Muslim Council the director of the Mayor's cabinet, Claude Bertrand, even compared the leading figures in the CIME and representatives of the Al-Islah mosque to the members of Al Qaeda cells in Europe who were discrete and well behaving students.⁴¹² The municipal government was unwilling to further develop the mosque project with the newly formed Regional Muslim Council. Instead other possible ways of thinking about improving the housing situation of Islamic practice in Marseilles were being explored. Perhaps there was no need for a Grand Mosque after all...

7.5. Islam de proximité

The Consultation, the formation of the CFCM and the events of 9/11 were not the only factors resulting in an almost continuous public discussion on Islam in France in the early years of the 21st century. The widely mediatised hearings and deliberations in 2003 of the Commission of Reflection on the Application of the Principle of *Laïcité* in the Republic, also known as the Stasi-commission, and the controversies on the headscarf also contributed its fair share. The parliamentary vote in February 2004 in favour of a law banning all conspicuous signs of religious affiliation from public schools seemingly meant further legal and political legitimacy for Republicanism and *laïcité*. Still, in my view the interpretation of the significance of the 2004 law as simply another illustration of the will of the French to consistently pursue Republicanism and strict secularism (*laïcité de combat*) when dealing with Islam is flawed for two reasons. First, important differences existed between the way this legal instrument was being represented in public and political discussions, and the internal regulations some schools made to make the

411. "Muslims remaking old France" in *The New York Times* April 10 2003.

412. Literally Bertrand said to a journalist: "They are very well educated, very refined. It is the profile of the people of Al-Qaeda. But I am not saying that that is what they are" (...) "We don't need the *Renseignements Généraux* to know that the people of Al-Islah (i.e. the mosque at the Flee Market, M.M.) are more fundamentalist than Dahmani. ["Ils sont très instruits, très cultivés. C'est le profil des gens d'Al-Qaeda. Mais je ne dis pas qu'ils en sont"] in "Marseilles rejette son Islam officiel" in *Libération* July 1 2003.

law more specific.⁴¹³ In actual practice many schools sought to find some sort of middle way, for example by allowing girls to wear a bandana or by insisting that girls remove their headscarf only when inside the classroom. Second, and more important, the 2004 law did indeed give a boost to Republican values, but it did so in a specific institutional and policy domain – the public schools – and with respect to a specific aspect of the presence of Islam, namely the display of religious identity by wearing the headscarf. This should not be equated with French public policy responses to Islam *tout court*.

The further development of necessary measures depended on the successful running of the CFCM, in place since 2003. The CFCM was an unstable institution, characterised by internal strife and disagreements and subject to constant attempts at interference by the French state and the governments of Algeria and Morocco. French government officials furthermore accentuated time and again that even though different tendencies and Muslim federations were included in the council, the most “liberal” federation – the Institute of the Paris Mosque – was to be in charge. The 2004 law constituted a new challenge for the Muslim body. It was clear that the government expected the members of the CFCM to display their support and respect for the new law and, by implication, to affirm the priority of the state over religion.⁴¹⁴ For some members of the Council – notably for the representatives of the UOIF – making public statements about the new law meant to face the double challenge of avoiding discrediting themselves as interlocutors for French public authorities and of convincing their constituencies that cooperation with the French government did not mean that they were compromising their ideas, religious values and demands.⁴¹⁵

Between 2004 and 2007 actual progress was being made in addressing practical concerns and providing for religious needs. Special national penitentiary chaplains were installed both for the military and for the penal system, who were to coordinate the activities of the official Muslim chaplains that were remunerated by the French state. There were new policy proposals to create training facilities for clergy, notably imams and chaplains, and the government intended to complement the religious curriculum of the training program with state-sponsored secular teaching. The construction of Muslim cemeteries was also an issue under consideration.⁴¹⁶ These policy responses were informed by concerns about equity, effective religious freedom and cooperation, and not so much by the principles of non-recognition and separation that are usually associated

413. For a discussion of the work of the Stasi commission and the discussions on the headscarf see Jansen 2006 and Bowen 2006.

414. In an interview held in December 2004 the Minister of the Interior, Dominique de Villepin, said that shortly before the beginning of the school year he had gathered together the representatives of the Muslim federations to tell them clearly that he would not tolerate any reservations when it came to the application of the new law. As the Minister put it: “In my function as Minister of Religions I will accompany the organisation of Islam in France. In return, I will refuse all ambiguities: The Republic, all of the Republic. The law, all of the law” in “Je veux des imams français parlant français” in *Le Parisien* December 7 2004.

415. In May 2004 the CFCM issued a statement saying that “the law cannot be interpreted as a general and absolute prohibition of all head coverings” (cited in Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 170). The vagueness and shallowness of these and other public statements of the Council were also illustrative of the many disagreements between its members. On July 5 the CFCM issued another statement and promised that it would play a role in the dialogue phase that would follow upon a disagreement between a school and a student on the headscarf issue. See Bowen 2006: 145.

416. See speech by François Fillon at the Paris Mosque on September 18 2007. Available on: www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr, extracted November 7 2007.

with the “French model”. The actual variety of government responses provides further illustration of the fact that different sets of governing strategies and different argumentative repertoires are a part of the French history of church-state relations, and that various ways of regulating the presence of Islam can appear as plausible and legitimate (cf. Bowen 2007: 1005). That conclusion can also be drawn when notice is taken of the continuation of the political and legal debate on the significance of *laïcité*.⁴¹⁷ The Council of State and the National Advisory Commission on Human Rights both issued reports on *laïcité* in 2004.⁴¹⁸ In addition a number of books and essays on *laïcité* were published in 2004 and 2005, also because of the upcoming celebration of the centennial of the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and the State.⁴¹⁹

Against this wider ongoing debate on *laïcité* and in light of explorations of possibilities to make legal modifications to facilitate and financially support newly established religious minorities, the debate on mosque building continued. In fact between 2004 and 2007 quite a far reaching reframing of the issue occurred, both at the national and at the municipal level.

7.5.1. Reframing mosques

Between the mid 1980s and the late 1990s ample use had been made of a dichotomous opposition between two images of mosques. There were the “disgraceful” (*indignes*) and problematic mosques in “basements”, “garages” and “hangars”. There were also the “real” and “Cathedral” mosques, such as the ones in Paris and Lyons. The “mosques in basements” stood for a series of problems, such as social marginalisation of Muslim populations and discrimination. Since 9/11 the idea that sometimes Islamic fundamentalist deliberately sought to sustain the “mosques in basements” had gained in popularity. Some French Mayors justified their support for the building of more respectable houses of worship as a way of doing away with the more obscure prayer spaces and thus combat Islamic extremism.⁴²⁰

In the early years of the 21st century, however, a different perception of the smaller makeshift mosques had come to prevail. Many mosque organisations and mosque users had enlarged, improved and renovated their prayer spaces in the foyers, HLM buildings and neighbourhoods. Often they had put a nicer new carpet in, painted and decorated the interior and made the

417. Prominent members of the Stasi commission, such as the political scientist and scholar of French religious history, René Rémond, argued that the commission had never suggested to restrict the promotion of respect for *laïcité* to the school system. Neither had it recommended that government action should first and foremost aim at banning expressions of religious affiliation. Moreover, the government seemed to have decided to ignore other, more pluralist, ideas and recommendations included in the report. These included measures to combat discrimination, to develop schooling programs teaching respect for diversity and to make important Islamic and Jewish feast days into official public holidays. See interviews with Rémond in *L'Humanité* February 11 2004 and *La Croix* March 4 2004.

418. See Conseil d'État *Rapport public 2004: réflexions sur la laïcité* and Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme *La laïcité aujourd'hui: rapport d'étape* (2004).

419. See for example Baubérot 2004; Pena-Ruiz 2005; and Roy 2006.

420. In October 2004 Nicolas Sarkozy stated that the French should not fear minarets but “garages and basements” (cited in Laurence and Vaisse 2006: 84). In July 2006 the Mayor of Istres argued that the creation of respectable and official prayer spaces was a way of creating obstacles to “the dubious places in which there is a risk that radical discourses can develop”. See “Islam dans le paysage provençal” in *La Croix* July 17 2006.

place for the ritual ablution prettier, for example by paving it with North African tiles. The worshippers now experienced their prayer house as quite adequate, especially for their daily needs for prayer and conviviality.⁴²¹ Seen from the outside these places perhaps did not resemble “real mosques”, but they could also not be written off as “garages” or “hangars”. What was more, these “discrete” spaces provided for the needs of a large group of mosque attendees in France, being older and middle aged men belonging to the first generation of immigrants, who often took some pride in the ways they themselves managed to see to the upkeep of their mosque.⁴²² A vocabulary gained in prominence to speak of these places in existing premises without discarding them as inadequate. They were called “neighbourhood mosques”, “pavilion-like mosques” (*mosquées pavillonnaires*) and “discrete prayer houses” (*salles de prière discrètes*).⁴²³ Importantly this vocabulary not only referred to the building state of houses of worship, it was also linked to the perception of possible patterns of organisation. As a correlate of the more positive reputation of the “neighbourhood mosques” there was also a vocabulary to speak of the organisation of Islam at the city district and neighbourhood level: the so-called “vicinity Islam” (*islam de proximité*) or “neighbourhood Islam” (*islam de quartier*). Prominent scholars of Islam in France spoke of a “normalised Islam” that was “tailor made” (*sur mesure*). They also portrayed this development as a process of emancipation of Islam at the city and neighbourhood level, for example by framing the development as about the “progressive autonomisation of places of worship”, and speaking of the emergence of “autonomous houses of worship” and of “Muslim parishes” (*des paroisses musulmans*).⁴²⁴ Mosques being “of the neighbourhood” (*du quartier*) also suggested a more positive understanding of them as partaking in the social fabric of local French society.⁴²⁵

The growing positive view of the neighbourhood mosque came at the expense of the idea that it was necessary to build Cathedral Mosques. Islam scholars and Muslim religious leaders had for more than a decade been criticising the concept “Cathedral Mosque”. Speaking of a Cathedral evoked the suggestion of organising the internal structure of religion in a unitary and hierarchical way, something that might be suitable for Catholicism but was seen as foreign to the Islamic tradition. There was also a more political critique of the concept that took notice of the ways French authorities had – in different historical periods – repeatedly sought to co-opt Muslim leaders by building new and beautiful mosques. Finally, there were also questions about whether building a beautiful and prestigious mosque with a minaret was the appropriate way to enforce recognition of the presence of Islam in France. Perhaps, on the contrary, by building a beautiful and typical mosque that was interesting to visit, Muslims were letting themselves be

421. See for example Abdoun et al. 2004; Frégosi et al. 2006.

422. For a discussion of the development of religious observance among Muslims in France see Laurence and Vaisse 2006 (in particular chapter 3) and Godard and Taussig 2007.

423. See for example the typologies in Frégosi et al. 2006: 39ff. and in Godard and Taussig 2007 : 102ff. See also “Les mosques investissent les pavillons” in *Libération* November 12 2004.

424. These terms are taken from Frégosi et al. 2006: 45ff. and Frégosi 2006. See also Bouzar 2004; and Ternisien 2004.

425. This view was confirmed in the report of the Machelon commission that concluded from its hearings with several mayors that the creation of houses of worship – Islamic or other – often helped to “strengthen the social ties in the neighbourhoods. This is all the more the case when their opening is done in the framework of a project that has been accompanied by public authorities and that has resulted in the construction of a real (*véritable*) religious building” (Machelon 2006: 19, my translation, M. M.).

manipulated into accepting a particular conception of the form and function of the mosque.⁴²⁶ A representative of a local Muslim association in the Lyons region observed:

The sociologists who want to build beautiful and visible mosques do not interest us. We know what they want: beautiful monuments which remind them of foreign countries, which remind them of their holidays in Morocco... This gives them the impression that they have accepted us. But we, we want something which is functional; adequate in terms of hygiene, safety, and that there is enough space to receive women, that is all. Why should there be a minaret when there is no call to prayer?⁴²⁷

According to the critics, the true recognition of Islam in France required that Muslims be allowed to decide themselves on what kind of mosque buildings they deemed adequate and appropriate.

7.5.2. Building mosques and municipal policy practices

The new ways of framing mosque establishment developed in close relation to ongoing policy practices at the national, regional and municipal level. Several municipal governments had commissioned studies on the need for prayer space and on the available offer of houses of worship.⁴²⁸ In October 2006 the director of the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs, Didier Leschi, declared in an interview with the newspaper *La Croix* that “the Islam of the basements” no longer existed. He confirmed the estimates made by the journalists of the total number of Islamic prayer houses in France going up from 1555 in 2001 to more than 2000 in 2006 and explained that at present France was in a phase of “accelerated catching up” (*ratrapage intensif*). Many of the prayer spaces in the basements of HLM-complexes were in the process of being relocated as part of urban restructuring projects. Leschi observed that ten years ago the idea of building noticeable Cathedral Mosques had prevailed, but that nowadays there was a general orientation among policy makers to facilitate the creation of “pavilion-like mosques” (*mosquées pavillonnaires*).⁴²⁹

426. On the website *Maison de l’Islam* an article called “Constructing beautiful mosques: okay but...” could be found in 2005. It summarized the appropriate religious motives when building a mosque. The beauty of a mosque should never become a reason for vanity and mosques should not serve to display exaggerate luxury, because it was more important to make “one’s heart beautiful” than to decorate mosque buildings. See “Construire de belles mosquées: d’accord mais...” available on <http://www.maison-islam.com/article.php?sid=61> extracted December 9 2005.

427. [“Les sociologies qui veulent construire des belles mosquées visibles ne nous intéressent pas. Nous comprenons ce qu’ils veulent: des beaux monuments qui leur rappellent l’étranger, qui leur rappellent leurs vacances au Maroc... Ça leur donne l’impression qu’ils nous ont acceptés. Mais nous, on veut quelque chose de fonctionnel: correct au niveau de l’hygiène, de la sécurité, et qu’il y ait assez d’espace pour accueillir les femmes, c’est tout. Pourquoi faudrait-il un minaret alors qu’il n’y a pas d’appel à la prière?”] (cited in Bouzar 2004: 116-117, my translation, M.M.).

428. These kind of overview studies had, for example, been made in Strasbourg, Mulhouse and Metz, see Frégosi 2006. There were also regional studies, for example made by the Regional Muslim Councils that since 2003 kept detailed records of the situation of mosques and of ongoing plans and constructions of mosques. See for example Conseil Régional du Culte Musulman d’Alsace (2004) *La Construction des lieux de culte musulman*.

429. In *La Croix* October 26 2006. See also “La nouvelle carte des lieux de culte” in *La Croix* October 25 2006.

Cities in various parts of France had opted for a more pragmatic and supportive policy approach. In practice this mostly came down to making inventories of the needs and situation of houses of worship and of being of help in the relocation and renovation of neighbourhood mosques. An important policy goal became to see to it that the “neighbourhood mosque” was well incorporated and accepted as a part of the neighbourhood and that, by consequence, “vicinity Islam” functioned as an integrated part of the daily life in the neighbourhoods (Frégosi et al. 2006: 54). The more pragmatic approach could also enlarge the possibilities for municipal authorities to make some financial support available. These subsidies could be justified by reference to ongoing urban restructuring projects or as contributions to the socio-cultural activities and accommodation costs of neighbourhood associations.

7.5.3. Financing mosque building

Throughout the 1990s several municipal governments had decided to directly finance the building or renovation of mosques. A well known case was the one in Montpellier where in 1995 a large warehouse had been renovated by the municipality in order to function as a mosque that could serve 2000 worshippers. Officially the mosque was called a “multipurpose community centre” (*une salle polyvalente*) that was being rented out to a Muslim association. However, it was a public secret that this centre was a mosque and the Mayor of Montpellier, Georges Frèche, declared loud and clear that he had built a mosque in the city.⁴³⁰ A constant theme in discussion on the financing of mosques was the fear that foreign donors might increasingly seek to step in to help finance mosques, also hoping to create networks of influence in France. Policy practices in several cities in the early 21st century suggested that local governments were increasingly willing to stretch the law to its limits in order to be able to help finance mosques. Again the case of Montpellier was most forthright. The municipality in this city again financed and built a mosque in 2003, once more calling it a multipurpose community centre. This time the “community centre” was in fact equipped with a small minaret.⁴³¹

These kinds of local policy responses necessitated some kind of elucidation by the national government. In February 2005 the Ministry of the Interior issued a directive addressed to the prefects, calling upon them to remind municipal authorities to see to the respect of legal regulations and not to obstruct the building of places of worship for inappropriate reasons or on illegal grounds.⁴³² In addition there were two initiatives taken to further regulate the financing of mosques in France; by the creation of a Foundation that could collect funds to be used to finance the costs of building mosques, and by considering the possibilities of revising the 1905 law.

A first idea was to create a Foundation that could help finance Islam in France. In December 2004 the Minister of the Interior, Dominique de Villepin, suggested that setting up a

430. See for example the interview with Georges Frèche “J’ai construit une mosquée à Montpellier” in *Islam de France* (1998): pp.76-79.

431. The Administrative Tribunal annulled this subsidy in September 2006. See “A Montpellier, la justice annule le financement d’une mosquée par la municipalité” in *Le Monde* September 27 2006.

432. See Circulaire NORINTA0500022C available at: http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/misill/sections/a_votre_service/lois_decrets_et_circulaires/2005/INTA0500022C.pdf/view extracted November 21 2007. Also Maurer 2006: 44.

private Foundation would allow for the necessary “channelling” of financial flows from private gifts, inheritances and foreign funds. Not only was the plan obviously “in the interest of all”, it was also said to be suitable given the French legal framework. All Muslim associations should support it, at least those associations that were in favour of a “responsible and transparent” way of organising Islam in France.⁴³³ With this statement the Minister was reacting to objections that had been raised by leaders of the UOIF. The secretary-general of the UOIF and vice-president of the CFCM, Fouad Alaoui, had said that setting up this kind of Foundation came down to an attempt to “nationalise the financing of Islam in France”.⁴³⁴

Alaoui argued that only Cathedral Mosques had been so expensive that foreign funds had to be used and that municipal financial support often was also necessary. Thus he cleverly underlined that often times French municipal governments, and not Muslim associations, had come up with the idea to build a Cathedral Mosques. It was now also the French government that suggested scrutinizing the financing of mosques. According to the vice-president of the UOIF, then, it would be a better strategy for Muslims in France to primarily seek to create privately owned smaller and middle-sized Islamic centres. He also argued that it was more appropriate for the French state to treat the financing of mosques as a private matter, given the principles of separation of church and state and that of equal treatment. Ironically, the secretary-general of the UOIF was now invoking *laïcité* to object to French authorities meddling directly in the building of mosques.

In the end, however, the leaders of the UOIF decided to back down. On March 21 2005 representatives of the UOIF and other major Muslim federations signed the statutes allowing for the creation of the Foundation to Finance Islam in France (*Fondation pour les oeuvres de l'islam de France*). The foundation, created under private law, was categorized as accomplishing a public interest (*d'utilité public*) meaning among other things that the French state could directly interfere with its administration (Maurer 2006: 46-47). The administrative council of the foundation was to include committees consisting of members of the different Muslim Federations and of the CFCM, qualified persons and a representative of the state appointed by the Minister of the Interior. In the Fall of 2007 the foundation had become a reality. Again the creation of the foundation can best be understood as emanating from the Gallican tradition and element in French church-state history. This became abundantly clear when the closest Muslim ally of the French government, the rector of the Paris Mosque, Dalil Boubakeur, was now also appointed as the president of the Foundation to Finance Islam in France. It remains to be seen how effective the new foundation will be.

A second idea under discussion was the possibility of revising the legal framework and modernizing the 1905 Law on the Separation of Churches and the State. In October 2004, Nicolas Sarkozy had suggested that it should be possible to consider to “further develop” (*faire évoluer*) the 1905 law in order to allow for a direct financing of mosque building. That time this suggestion had led to some polemic debate and it had quickly been discarded by president

433. See “Je veux des imams français parlant français” in *Le Parisien* December 7 2004. See also Maurer 2006: 46.

434. In an interview in *Le Monde* Fouad Alaoui explained: “I fear that tomorrow the local authorities will exclusively give credits to associations which are patronized by this foundation (...) The tradition in Islam is that the places of worship are financed by the believers through donations and collections. And the state is a facilitator, it is neither the owner nor the financer of the construction of mosques.” Interview in *Le Monde* December 1 2004, my translation, M.M.

Chirac and Prime Minister Raffarin.⁴³⁵ Back in office as Minister of the Interior since May 2005, Sarkozy decided to create a *Commission de réflexion juridique sur les relations des cultes avec les pouvoirs publics*. That commission, presided over by the legal scholar Jean-Pierre Machelon, would advise on the need for and the possibilities of amendments to the 1905 law.

The Machelon Commission published its report in September 2006. Members of the commission argued that the 1905 law had in recent times been too often talked about in light of its second article, which stipulates that the state “does not recognize nor pay the salaries of any religion”. They underlined that a primary goal of the law was to protect religious freedom and equal treatment (Machelon 2006: 12ff.). In view of the present situation, notably of Islam and of other religious newcomers, a series of possible measures were discussed. One of these measures was to allow for direct subsidies for the building of houses of worship. Such a measure would be inscribed in the legal practice and tradition of the 20th century, in which the French state had always, in specific circumstances, been involved in stimulating the building, repairs and upkeep of religious buildings. Moreover, it would be a manifestation of the willingness of the Republic to show its concern for those social groups that were facing disadvantages, and would create more transparency in the financing of houses of worship (Machelon 2006: 26ff.).

This attempt of some influential legal scholars to give a new turn to the ongoing discussion on the meaning of church-state arrangements in France led to a storm of protest.⁴³⁶ Advocates of strict or militant secularism (*laïcité de combat*) stood up in public, political and academic debate to protest against what they saw as an attack on *laïcité*. Following the critical reception of the report, French politicians, including the presidential candidates Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, already announced that they did not intend to follow up on the recommendations and modify the text of the 1905 law.⁴³⁷ In October 2007, however, a new working group of legal advisers was installed to study the recommendations of the commission and come up with a proposal to the government.⁴³⁸

7.5.4. Islam de proximité in Marseilles

The ongoing policy discussions on mosque creation in France would have an effect on discussions in Marseilles. In June 2004 the mayor declared that the municipality would seek to ac-

435. There was some political support for the idea, for example from the MP and Mayor of Créteil, Laurent Cathala (Socialist). See “Le maire PS veut assouplir la loi de 1905” in *Libération* December 8 2004. The suggestion to create a Foundation to Finance Islam in France was also said to be a strategic move of De Villepin, who was in competition with Sarkozy in view of the candidature for the Right for the upcoming presidential elections. In reaction to Sarkozy’s idea, De Villepin stated in an interview held in October that the “fundamental principle” of secularism should not be compromised. See “Villepin s’oppose à Sarkozy sur la loi de 1905” in *Le Figaro* November 1 2004.

436. See for example “Seize députés critiques le rapport Machelon” in *Le Figaro* October 27 2006.

437. See “Financement des lieux de culte: aménager sans bouleverser” in *Le Monde* July 5 2007.

438. See speech by Prime Minister François Fillon at the Paris Mosque on September 18 2007. For a complete reference see above.

commodate the numerous demands to improve the housing conditions of “vicinity Islam”.⁴³⁹ As an important additional justification of the new municipal approach, reference was made to a study on the “religious panorama” (*panorama cultuel*) that had shown that the lack of adequate Islamic space for worship had already by and large ceased to exist in Marseilles.

The study that the municipal government invoked to support its new policy was a part of a larger research project on the conditions for Islamic worship in four regions in France.⁴⁴⁰ In their case study on Marseilles the researchers had counted and described in total 47 prayer halls and they had reported numerous ongoing efforts to renovate neighbourhood mosques. There were plans for an enlargement of the mosque at La Capelette. The Comorian community was said to plan to build a Grand Comorian Mosque (Frégosi et al. 2006: 59). An association affiliated with the missionary movement Tabligh had created a mosque with a small minaret by a thorough renovation of an existing building, thereby taking a dodge with the building permit.⁴⁴¹ The researchers concluded that with 47 spaces, mostly located in the *quartiers populaires*, the offer of prayer houses in Marseilles was “satisfactory” (2006: 68).

With the overview study in hand, the municipal government presented its new approach as a temporary additional effort to improve and regularise the housing situation of Islamic prayer spaces. A further study was to be made. From now on, when a mosque association would seek to create or renovate a prayer house, municipal officials would try and be of help to find an adequate location or a suitable building. When a mosque could effectively be relocated or created anew the municipality would seek to simultaneously close down some of the smaller and often illegal and unsafe prayer spaces in the immediate environment. The process of gradual improvement and regularisation was to be carried out in close cooperation with the city district authorities and with the Regional Muslim Council.⁴⁴²

In November 2005 the mayor performed the official opening of the earlier mentioned small purpose-built mosque, located not far from the centre of the city. It was ironical that in the preceding decades municipal authorities had always sought to minimize the public attention for the creation of the mosques in the neighbourhood, fearing that media attention would fuel public protests of neighbouring residents and extreme right parties. Now mosque openings and building permits were deliberately publicized and virtually represented as policy outcomes. However, the mayor also hurried to mention that the new policy approach focussed on “neighbourhood Islam” need not mean that a Grand Mosque could not be built. If Muslims developed a viable project they would still find a listening ear at the City Hall. It seemed unlikely that such

439. “Comment Jean-Claude Gaudin (UMP) a renoncé à son ‘grand projet’” in *Le Monde* June 17 2004.

440. This was the earlier mentioned study issued by the FASILD that had been completed and published in May 2004. It was published in the form of a book only in 2006. In 2004 there were still in total 28 foyers for workers that were administrated by the SONACOTRA in Marseilles (Frégosi et al. 2006: 62).

441. The building permit had in fact initially been cancelled after protest by representatives of the Front National (Frégosi et al. 2006: 53). A political pamphlet of the Front National issued in 2001 showed a photograph of the ongoing building activities of this mosque. The picture was accompanied by statements such as “The Grand Mosque of Marseilles: it is already being built” and “The minaret that obstructs the sky of the Good Mother” [“Le minaret qui bouche le ciel de la bonne mère”]. Personal archive of the author.

442. See reply of the mayor to questions raised by council member Tahar Rahmani in the municipal council of Marseilles March 21 2005. In May 2005 a terrain of 19,000 square meters in the 11th arrondissement was given in long term lease to a Muslim association to build a mosque. See “Marseille fournit un terrain pour une mosquée” in *Le Figaro* May 10 2005.

a thing would happen. A journalist of *Le Monde* wrote that events in the Southern French city showed that the “days of ‘Cathedral Mosques’” were over.⁴⁴³

Still, it remained to be seen what would happen with the other objectives articulated around the hearings on the Grand Mosque in 2001 and 2002, such as the creation of a symbol of the presence of Islam and the setting up of a larger Islamic Cultural Centre. The creation of a number of smaller purpose built mosques could be seen as a way of recognising the presence of Islam. The adding of a minaret and a dome to mosques in existing premises, as had happened with the mosque at La Capelette, also made Islam more noticeable in the urban landscape. The creation of a cultural centre could also be seen as a matter best left to private initiatives taken by Muslims. In October 2003, for example, the UOIF had presented plans to develop a large Islamic centre in the Northern part of Marseilles. This centre was to be created in premises the Muslim association already owned and it would include a private Muslim school, a mosque and spaces for socio-cultural activities.⁴⁴⁴

However, this type of private Islamic centre did not really correspond to the image municipal officials, the “mufti” and “secular Muslims” had been developing a few years earlier. In May 2005 one of them, municipal council member Tahar Rahmani, suggested that the municipality should indeed create an Arab-Muslim cultural institute to function as a counterweight to the kind of “communal associations” that, so he argued, several of the neighbourhood mosques actually were. The conservative religious message that were preached in the smaller houses of worship had great attraction power on the youth and it stimulated a process of “ethnic closing in” (*communautarisme*). To oppose this trend the Mayor should anew set up a committee – this time solely consisting of secular people – to develop plans for a cultural centre.⁴⁴⁵ In reply the Mayor promised to issue a new study on the possibilities of creating a *Institut culturel arabo-musulman*.⁴⁴⁶ However, before this idea could be further developed events would take a surprising new turn.

7.5.5. A Grand Mosque and a cultural centre after all

In June 2005, for the second time, elections were held for the National and Regional Muslim Councils. In the PACA region these elections would result in important changes in the power balance between different groups of Muslims. In 2003 the Regional Muslim Council had been dominated by an independent list presided over by the Al-Islah mosque and the list presented by the UOIF. By their collaboration these two groups had managed to put the members elected on the list of the Paris Mosque in a subdominant position.

In the two years the Regional Council had been in place it had been characterised by ongoing internal strife and conflicts. Gradually local representatives of the UOIF had come

443. “Le temps des ‘mosquée cathédrales’ semble révolu” in *Le Monde* June 17 2004

444. See “Un collège musulman bientôt ouvert à Marseille” in *Le Figaro* March 1 2005.

445. See Tahar Rahmani “Pour un Institut du Monde Arabe à Marseilles” March 21 2005 on http://www.conventionci-toyenne.com/elus05_03_21_2.htm, extracted December 9 2005.

446. One idea was to combine this centre with the new *Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée* to be established in Marseilles. See for a presentation of this project: <http://www.musee-europemediterranee.org/projet.html>, accessed on December 9 2005.

to the conclusion that, in view of possible cooperation with the municipality, it was wise to take more distance from the council members who were elected on the independent list and from some prominent members affiliated with the Al-Islah mosque. In the 2005 elections the independent list once more collected most of the votes. This time, however, the UOIF council members and those elected on the list of the Paris Mosque decided to support together the candidacy of Abderrahmane Ghoul, affiliated with the Paris Mosque, to become president of the Regional Council.⁴⁴⁷ The new alliances and the fact that the president was now affiliated with the Paris Mosque, created new opportunities for cooperation with the municipal government of Marseilles. Another important obstacle was also lifted when Soheib Bencheikh, stepped down from his position as “mufti”.

In this new situation the project for a Grand Mosque quickly reappeared on the agenda. The president of the Regional Muslim Council, Abderrahmane Ghoul, and the regional representative of the UOIF, Mohcen N’Gazou, agreed on the formation of a new association called “The Mosque of Marseilles”. Nordine Cheikh, a local businessman of Algerian origin, was elected as the president of this association in early 2006. Cheikh was an active member of the Muslim community in Marseilles, but otherwise he was relatively unknown. Strategically what mattered was that Cheikh was not a confrontational figure and that he was also seen as a protégé of the Paris Mosque. The municipality welcomed the new association. In July 2006 the municipality signed a long-term lease of 99 years with the new association, giving them the use of a plot of land of more than 8,000 square meters located in the neighbourhood Saint Louis, the property that had already been selected during the hearings in 2001. The agreement would allow the association to lease the terrain for the symbolical amount of 300 euros per year.



Picture 7.4 Project Mosque Marseilles, 2008

In April 2007 political representatives of the extreme right parties MNR, Front National and the Mouvement pour la France (MPF) protested to the administrative tribunal and argued that a long-term lease for the sum of € 300 per annum was “unusually low” and therefore an “illegal” form of subsidy of religion.⁴⁴⁸ Their protest was successful and the tribunal ruled that indeed this should be seen as an indirect form of public subsidy for the mosque, and therefore as a violation of the 1905 Law.⁴⁴⁹ In order to avoid further delays the municipal government of Marseilles

447. In these elections the independent list collected 175 votes, the list of the Mosque of Paris 124, the FNMF 101 and the UOIF 59. See also “A Marseille le conseil régional de culte musulman doit élire à nouveau un président” in *Le Monde* May 28 2006.

448. See “Des mosquées menacées au nom de la loi de 1905” in *Libération* May 5 2007.

449. It was remarkable that an administrative tribunal declared a long term lease for a symbolic amount illegal. Only two years earlier the French government had issued a directive calling upon the prefect and municipal

decided to make a new contract, stipulating that the terrain would be leased for 24,000 euros a year for a period of 50 years. This new contract was signed at the end of July 2007.⁴⁵⁰

On November 22 the Mayor of Marseilles symbolically handed over the keys of the future mosque to the Nordine Cheikh. Significantly the most noticeable Muslim representatives during the ceremony were the president of the Paris Mosque and of the CFCM, Dalil Boubakeur, and the president of the Regional Muslim Council and the new protégé of the Paris Mosque in Marseilles, Abderrahmane Ghoul. It appeared that the demand articulated by Abdelkader Ben Ghabrit in 1937 and that was repeated by French Secret Services in 1951, namely that a mosque in Marseilles could only be built if it was put under the control of the Paris Mosque, was fulfilled in the end, with a delay of seventy years.⁴⁵¹

7.6. Conclusion

In the literature it has been stipulated that France has been reluctant to respond positively to Muslim demands to create prayer houses in a manner they deemed appropriate (Koenig 2003: 183ff.; Fetzer and Soper 2005: 87ff.). In addition, it is commonly argued that in France public authorities have consistently refused to make any financial contribution to the creation of prayer spaces. This chapter has shown that this view is at best a simplified representation. It also cannot explain why and how public authorities have become increasingly involved in the improvement of houses of worship since the late 1990s.

From the second half of the 1980s onwards French governing strategies towards Islam developed around the idea that it was necessary to stimulate the emergence of an “Islam of France”. In bigger cities with larger Muslim populations, such as Lyons, Marseilles and Strasbourg, the idea resulted in the plan to create a purpose-built Cathedral Mosque that could function as a symbol of recognition and as an institutional support for a “French Islam”. The Paris Mosque exemplified what a Cathedral Mosque should be like: it should be a prestigious and noticeable building, an organisational and institutional centre of a “liberal” branch of Islam, and open and accessible to the wider public. From the mid 1980s onwards it also went without saying that it was a problem that Muslims in France had to worship “on the street” and in “basements” and “garages”. In the course of the 1990s municipal policy approaches increasingly began to diverge: some local governments were uncooperative, others decided to help Muslims

authorities to apply the law and make use of the provision of this kind of long term lease (*bail emphytéotique*) to allow for the building of mosques. Also in term of jurisprudence and legal practice since the 1940s this ruling was surprising and it seemed to be based on a contestable interpretation of the 1905 law. This was also argued by Jean Baubérot in an article published in *Le Monde*. See “La République ne subventionne pas les cultes, mais elle garantit leur libre exercice. Les juges ne devraient pas l’oublier” in *Le Monde* July 18 2007. In the 1940s the practice of long term leases for a symbolic amount had been introduced in view of allowing for the building of churches in France (see chapter 2).

450. The MNR has decided to also file a legal protest against this new contract. See “Marseille, prodigue sans exclusive” in *L’expansion* December 1 2007.

451. The architectural plans for the Grand Mosque were presented in July 2008. See “Mosquée de Marseille: le projet se précise, pas son financement” in *Rue89* July 4 2008.

to improve the housing situation of their prayer houses, and some municipal governments contributed financially to mosque building, by legal but also by semi-legal ways.

The Consultation on Islam that began in 1999 led the French government to become more actively involved in finding solutions for the practical concerns that mattered to Muslims. A more pragmatic approach that focussed on improving the adequacy and sufficiency of prayer space was made possible because the mosque problem was now predominantly framed as about improving the housing conditions of “vicinity Islam”. This framing steered the issue of mosque establishment away from contentious discussion on the organisation of Islam and from discussions on whether and how the presence of Islam should be visibly expressed in the public sphere. It was also new that the national government now began to play a more prominent role in policy responses to mosque creation: First, it explicitly and repeatedly called upon prefects and municipal governments to be supportive of mosque creation. Second, new possibilities were investigated for a more direct influence on the financing of mosques, in cooperation with the national and regional Muslim councils.

The reconstruction of public discussions and policy responses to mosque creation in France has brought to light important shifts and variation across time, and between national and local institutional levels. Still, it is also clear that there are also particular types and patterns of policy responses that are consistent over longer periods of time and that reflect argumentations, institutional repertoires and motivations that are recognisably “French”.

Successive French governments re-invented and promoted *laïcité* as the guiding institutional principle to regulate the presence of Islam, but simultaneously came up with the idea of creating an “Islam of France”, which re-mobilised the Gallican tradition of state dominance over religion. Moreover, the related idea of creating Grand Mosques to serve as symbols and institutional carriers of “French Islam” evoked the colonial traditions in which prestigious mosques had sometimes served as a “reward” for those Muslim factions willing to cooperate with the French. In Marseilles, in addition, the building of a Cathedral Mosque was framed in terms of local policies of intercommunity relations that in many respects echoed the Concordatarian model in which public authorities would recognise the established religious communities. The use of institutional repertoires related to contrasting lines of reasoning within the French church-state traditions resulted in public policy responses that were in tension with each other. For example, the principle of secularism was taken to imply that French authorities could no longer finance the Grand Mosque themselves, as they had done in colonial times, but the Gallican tradition implied that French authorities could not afford to lose control over religion by allowing Muslims to create large, private Islamic centres with the help of foreign donors. When the idea of improving the housing of “vicinity Islam” arose, it seemed easier to situate policy responses more firmly within the framework of the 1905 law. However, as the contentious discussions around the report of the Machelon commission have shown, in a situation in which minority religions obviously lacked sufficient and adequate facilities for religious practice it was a subject for debate whether policy responses should be informed by the idea that the state guarantees free exercise of religion (article 1 of the 1905 law) or by the idea that the state does not finance religion (article 2). This illustrates that even when there is agreement on which (aspect of) institutional repertoires should prevail, there is still room for interpretation – and thereby for disagreements – on what institutional arrangements imply for concrete policy responses.

Policy responses to mosque establishment are also shaped by specific understandings, representations and framings of the issues they intend to address and solve. It matters greatly whether in responding to mosque creation municipal authorities think they are creating a symbol

of recognition, stimulating immigrant integration, combating social exclusion, fighting the growing influences of radical Islam, guaranteeing effective religious freedom or taking away feelings of resentment among young Muslims. Most probably they will argue that they are achieving multiple objectives at the same time. I have in particular focussed on the various meanings that were being ascribed to “mosques” in policy discourses and the different understandings that were being invoked in figures of speech such as the “basements of Islam”, “Cathedral Mosques”, “*mosquées-hangars*” or “vicinity mosques”.

At this point it is useful to distinguish two critical junctures in the discussions in Marseilles. The first juncture occurred in the late 1980s when the idea of building a Cathedral Mosque linked the creation of an “Islam in France” to the incorporation of the Muslim community into the local model of pluralism. As a result of this framing the issue was allocated to the policy field of community relations and was understood as being about recognition and the organisation of Islam. This made it an extremely complex policy issue, also because it brought into play a variety of local, national and transnational stakeholders, each seeking to defend their interests and positions of influence. A second critical juncture occurred when the municipality took up the frame suggesting that there should be room for “vicinity Islam” and that a primary objective should be to improve the “neighbourhood mosques”. Given the fact that the inadequate housing situation of the small prayer spaces had been on the public agenda since the early 1980s it was striking that it took almost 25 years for a municipal approach to develop that could effectively address this issue. The more pragmatic approach associated the “regularisation” of the housing of Islamic worship with the policy field of urban planning. Events in 2005 and 2006 showed that these two framings of the creation of mosques were not mutually exclusive, and that efforts to improve the situation of the neighbourhood mosques could exist alongside the creation of, what Geisser and Zemouri (2007: 246) have ironically called, “a Grand Paris Mosque in Marseilles” to function as a symbol of “Islam of France”.

What actual policy responses were developed and implemented also depended on a range of situational factors. An important factor in France, and especially in Marseilles, have been electoral politics. Immigrant integration and the presence of Islam are sensitive issues in most European countries, but especially in France national governing strategies towards Islam are very much informed by electoral strategies and political goals, including those related to foreign relations with North African governments. In addition, the contentious nature of discussions in Marseilles should be understood in light of the institutional framework of French local politics, in which the district system and the possibilities for politicians to have different mandates, create strong linkages between national and local political agendas. Nearly every two years there were elections and political campaigns in which integration issues would invariably be discussed and in which extreme right parties had a prominent voice, and these would come together on the local discussion on mosque of Marseilles. In addition, there were important events at national and international levels that shaped policy discussions. Finally, there were numerous idiosyncrasies that have left their mark on the course of events, among them the fact that the businessman Mustafa Slimani presented a megalomaniac project for a multipurpose Islamic centre in the Fall of 1989, thus blocking the road for other more sensible mosque projects, or the way Soheib Bencheikh succeeded for a decade in positioning himself as the “mufti of Marseilles” and to strategically make use of the media attention he received to discredit quite a few local grassroots Muslim associations as representatives of “forces of darkness”.