

Pan-Islamic Ideals and National Loyalties:
Competing Attachments amongst early Muslim Activists in France

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Introduction

Islamist movements – which “mobilise and agitate in the political sphere while deploying signs and symbols from Islamic traditions” (Ismail 2006: 2) – are often considered transnational movements *par excellence* for encouraging cross-national political dynamics and cultivating pan-Islamic senses of belonging (Dalacoura 2001; Moghadam 2009). Scholars of influential Islamist groups, such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Milli Görüs and the Muslim Brotherhood, have stressed their transnational characteristics in terms of intellectual influences, organisational linkages, and circulations of people (Karam 2004; Rubin 2010; Hasan 2014). At the core of these transnational circulations lies a normative ideal: the imperative of pan-Islamic solidarity. Islamist actors are thus seen to be challenging the territorial logic of nation-state sovereignty by calling for Muslim unity beyond ethnic, racial, and geographical antecedents.¹ Their ambition, it is argued, is concerned with orchestrating an imagined *umma* — the global community of Muslim believers — as the basis of an alternative political order.

While providing insightful perspectives on transnational Islamism, these accounts overlook the fact that Islamist movements largely focus their action within particular national borders, and that “their day-to-day efforts are concerned almost exclusively with local- and national- agendas in the countries in which they operate” (Mandaville 2011: 10). For the majority of Islamist actors, the prime objective remains to build a nation-state-based *umma* (Roy 2003), grounded in specific national affiliations and shaped by domestic political settings. What is more, these accounts often assume that participants in Islamist

movements share collective political interests across borders. Transnational Islamist movements are presented as homogeneous, coherent entities, whose agendas are determined by common understandings of the *umma*. In doing so, conventional accounts overplay the influence of pan-Islamic political imagination, and obscure the persistence of national forms of identification in these movements.

The article seeks to tackle the unexplored tensions between supranational ideals and national loyalties, through the case study of early Islamist networks in France.² In addition to being highly influential in the broader European Islamic landscape, these networks offer unparalleled insights into the negotiation of political loyalties in migratory and post-migratory environments. In contrast to the Islamist movements that they left in their countries of origin, which were largely based on country-specific sociabilities, Muslim activists arrived in France in the late 1970s and early 1980s from different national backgrounds. As such, their migratory experiences acted as a magnifying glass of the internal diversity of Islamist movements and prompted unprecedented dilemmas regarding pan-Islamic consciousness, long-distance activism, and re-territorialisation in a foreign country. Studying these experiences allows capturing not only the mechanisms that are necessary for cultivating a sense of membership across national origin groups, but also the discreet reconfiguration of national affiliations in transnational movements.

Put in more general terms, the case of early Islamist networks in France speaks to important questions that touch upon potentially competing forms of political consciousness and belonging: internationalist solidarity,³ political loyalty to the homeland, and allegiance to the host country. Scholars of contemporary politics have long been interested in movements concerned with cosmopolitan ideologies, that is, movements bringing people together from various national origins and uniting them on the basis of moral obligations extending beyond state borders (Halliday 1988). From labour internationalism to

internationalist anarchism, and from foreign fighters in civil conflicts to alter-globalisation mobilisations (Levy 2004; Bantman 2006; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Malet 2013), cosmopolitan movements champion normative platforms of ideas and actions that encourage solidarity across national boundaries. In other words, these movements offer social environments in which new collective identities are forged that surpass nation-state affiliations. The puzzle addressed in this article is thus concerned with the persistence and profusion of national grammars of identification in movements that precisely aspire to bypass national affiliations.⁴ Through an in-depth historical case study, it examines the ways in which national sentiments play out in activist circles unified by a cosmopolitan ideology and, thereby, questions the assumption of a community of interests uniting members of internationalist movements. It also traces the way migration and resettlement transform politico-religious claims to universality, disconnecting them from the contexts in which they were initially embedded and couching them into new localised idioms –in our case study, through the denunciation of extra-territorial loyalties by French Muslim activists of Arab heritage, and their activation of a French nationalist rhetoric. In a word, the article unpacks the accompanying processes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation that travelling bearers of (allegedly) universal messages have to come to terms with, and analyses the reconfiguration of national attachments in cosmopolitan endeavours.

The article is structured as follows. After delineating the set of untapped historical sources used to document early Islamist networks in France, it examines how these networks functioned as a breeding ground for pan-Islamic projects and aspirations. However, cross-national forms of sociability did not prevent Muslim activists from disagreeing upon strategic priorities, and the article proceeds by showing how these disagreements overlap with competing national loyalties. It concludes by discussing the relevance of national forms of identification in internationalist movements.

Methodology: inquiring into the transnational connections of networks under surveillance

The analysis presented below relies upon the critical assessment of a variety of sources. The core material is composed of transcribed interviews with twenty-three members of early Islamist networks in France. Amongst them, 13 arrived in France between 1975 and 1984 and 10 between 1985 and 1994. All but one of the interviewees are men, and originate from different Arab countries: nine originate from Morocco, seven from Tunisia, three from Algeria, three from Lebanon, and one from Mauritania. For the interviews, I met them between 2015 and 2017 in their city of residence in France (Bordeaux, Caen, Lille, Marseille, Paris), except for one who returned to Lebanon and whom I interviewed in Beirut. The interviews lasted two and half hours on average, leaving plenty of time for rich biographical accounts, and focused upon their personal trajectory and experiences of political and religious activism both in their home countries and in France.

As far as interviewees are concerned, it is worth noting that Muslim activists with Islamist heritage in France are subject to much political and media scrutiny, and that their transnational connections are a particularly sensitive topic. Dramatic political and journalistic portrayals regularly accuse them of being “fifth columnists” serving foreign interests and threatening national security, particularly in the aftermath of the January and November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris. Their consent with respect to being interviewed needs to be understood against such a security-saturated backdrop, as interviewees were partly willing to participate in the research project in order to debunk images of an Islamist International sweeping across French Muslim populations. As such, they perceived my research project as a potential channel of reputational rehabilitation. However, as some of

them were worried about the potentially negative repercussions for their daily life and career if their identity were to be publicised, I chose to anonymise all of them by using pseudonyms.

In addition to collecting the life stories of key actors, I relied upon a number of complementary materials. Firstly, I drew upon published materials — in the form of biographies, memoirs and interviews — of members of early Islamist networks whom I did not have the chance to interview: Boubaker El Hadj Amor (El Hadj Amor 2017), Rachid Ghannouchi (Tamimi, 2001), Rachid Lahlou (Lahlou 2018), Faysal Mawlawi (Abuzayd 2013), and Tareq Oubrou (Oubrou, Privot and Baylocq 2009; Oubrou and Lieven 2012). These five individuals lived in France at some point during the period under study (from the late 1970s to the early 1990s) and were active in Islamist networks in different ways. Secondly, I collected and analysed historical documents produced by Muslim activists in France, such as associational statutes, reviews, and internal archives. Finally, in order to confront the oral and written testimonies of Muslim activists with external points of view, I carried out archival work in French governmental archives and in the national press. Regarding French governmental archives, I was granted special access to classified materials produced by different services of the Interior Ministry. Covering a period between 1995 and 2005, these materials include intelligence briefings, political memos, and confidential data on mosques and imams. With regard to the French press, I conducted a systematic analysis of all articles mentioning Islamist networks in France in one of the most important daily newspapers in France, *Le Monde*, from the late 1970s until the present day.

France as a contact zone for Islamists and a breeding ground for pan-Islamic ideals

A few studies exist on the emergence of politico-religious circles with Muslim Brotherhood lineages in Europe (Kepel 1987; Amghar 2008; Rubin 2010; Bakker and Meijer 2013). Brigitte Maréchal (2008), in particular, documented how the implantation of Islamist

movements in Europe resulted from individual trajectories rather than from coordinated decisions. She distinguishes two groups that compose the core of the European politico-religious circles in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Islamist political refugees escaping the repression of their home countries, and pious students coming to Europe for education-related purposes.

The genesis of Islamist networks in France reflects this twofold pathway of migration. The *Association des étudiants islamiques en France* (Association of Islamic Students in France, AEIF), which was founded in 1963, served as an initial hub for individuals with Islamist leanings, be they political exiles with Muslim Brotherhood sympathies or Arab students with no prior affiliation with Islamist movements but made receptive to their ideological tenets by their pious lifestyle. The AEIF soon faced competition by the *Groupement islamique en France* (Islamic Group in France, GIF), founded in 1979, which also functioned as a contact zone for likeminded Muslim students and activists (Amghar 2008: 70). The GIF quickly expanded as the principal organisational structure for Islamist networks in France, being referred to as the “headquarters of the Muslim Brothers” in activist circles (Abuzayd 2013). Its leading figures decided to create the *Union des organisations islamiques en France* (Union of Islamic Organisations in France, UOIF) in 1983 in order to gather other Muslim associations scattered throughout French territory (Lille, Nice, Amiens, Bordeaux, etc.).

Of interest for our analysis, followers of the GIF and — a few years later — the UOIF were mostly coming from Middle Eastern and North African countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The make-up of the executive committees of these two organisations illuminates the junction of national origin groups. As for the GIF, the 1981 executive committee was composed of Tunisian Mokhtar Jaballah (president), Algerian Bachir Aïssaoui (treasurer), and Tunisian Soughir Romdhane

(secretary). Regarding the UOIF, the first executive committee in 1983 consisted of Egyptian engineer Ahmed Nashat, Iraqi teacher of electronics Mahmoud Zuhair, and Syrian medical student Mostapha Bacha. Two years later, the UOIF executive committee was renewed, reflecting a power shift from Middle Eastern to North African leaders but still epitomising the multinational character of the Islamist movement in France: Tunisian Ahmed Jaballah was chosen as president, Tunisian Abdallah Ben Mansour was given the role of secretary, and Moroccan Rachid Lahlou was nominated treasurer.

The mixing of activists from diverse national backgrounds makes the case of Islamist networks in France particularly interesting for students of transnational politics. Their relocation in a foreign space created a nodal point for interactions and exchanges that would have remained unlikely in their home countries.⁵ This is what Nadir* implies in discussing his trajectory from central Morocco to the southwest of France in order to undertake medical studies in the early 1980s: “Our one chance is that France has allowed us to meet — different countries, different languages, different experiences — and to be united to try to do something together. It was really something unique.”⁶ For Nadir*, the gathering of activists from numerous North African and Middle Eastern countries prompted them to experience a sense of cosmopolitan brotherhood. This is also what Saad*, an accountant of Lebanese descent, felt after discovering the Parisian Islamist milieu: “Living in Paris was extremely enriching: it is where we met forty different nationalities, forty different cultures.”⁷ These quotations suggest the relational process of identity construction in multinational environments, with evolving self-understandings associated with cross-cultural encounters.

In this rich multicultural setting, a common denominator united Muslim political exiles and students: their Islamic faith. In the interviews, members of early Islamist networks spontaneously underscored their eye-opening realisation of the universality of Islam upon their arrival in France. This is what Abdelfattah* explains in recounting his journey in the

late 1970s from Sfax, Tunisia to Valenciennes, France with the ambition to pursue engineering studies. He recalls his encounter with the multinational Islamist movement in the following terms:

[Meeting Muslim students from different national backgrounds] had an unexpected impact. It had an impact that we would know on a theoretical level but that we did not know on a practical level, which is the universality of Islam. When we talk about universal Islam — meaning that it transcends borders, races and nations — it was a theory for Tunisians, it was a theory for Egyptians, etc. But when we all meet together and share the same basic doctrine, we finally see borders disappear tacitly.⁸

His words illustrate the socially constructed consciousness of Islamic universalism, with the community of Muslim believers becoming a politically significant form of collective identity for him upon his settlement in France. Bowen (2004: 882) justly stated in this regard: “In its impulse to refuse particularistic loyalties to ethnic groups or to a nation-state, this consciousness first and foremost creates an imagination of an Islamic community transcending specific boundaries and borders.”

The transformative experience of supranational feelings of belonging is also chronicled by Tareq Oubrou in one of his autobiographical works. Oubrou, another participant of early Islamist networks in France, travelled from Taroudant, Morocco to Bordeaux, France in the late 1970s with the view of obtaining a degree in biology. He tells the story of his immersion into diverse Muslim student networks (Oubrou and Lieven 2012: 35):

The student milieu in Bordeaux was witnessing at the time a great effervescence with the massive arrival of foreign students, coming from the Maghreb, the Near East, Mauritius, sub-Saharan Africa... Uprooted from my Berber-Arab microcosm of South Morocco, where traditional Islam is practised, I experience overnight an intense ethnic, geographical and cultural mix. Far from home, Islam suddenly carries a universal dimension that I had not suspected.

Moving away from his cultural homeland, Oubrou came to realise what he calls the “universal dimension” of Islam. To use Olivier Roy’s (2013: 2) terminology, migration to Europe forced Muslim activists to break away from their localised cultures and conceive their religious belonging in a space that was no longer territorial. Such exposure to Islamic universality through migration mirrors the feelings of belonging to the global *umma* aroused during the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (Mols and Buitelaar 2015).

Multinational spaces of socialisation and long-distance attachment to the Muslim world

Islamist networks in France provided followers with multinational spaces of socialisation designed to nurture these pan-Islamic feelings. Such spaces were exceptions in the French Islamic landscape at the time: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of prayer houses and mosques in France were structured along lines of national belonging. Turks would gather in Turkish mosques (i.e. with a Turkish imam carrying out sermons in Turkish language), Moroccans in Moroccan mosques, Algerians in Algerian mosques, etc. This nationally embedded religious infrastructure had much to do with the involvement of sending states — notably Algeria, Morocco and Turkey — which heavily invested in funding prayer houses and employing imams with the view of controlling their diasporas in France and ensuring the maintenance of economic links (Laurence 2012; Bruce 2019). The French government, on its part, saw many benefits in outsourcing the management of Muslim communities to their homeland governments, notably the nurturing of cultural and religious ties that would facilitate the return of (perceived) temporary migrant workers. In contrast to these home-country-oriented Muslim associations — what Laurence (2012) calls an “Embassy Islam” — organisations run by Muslim activists, such as the GIF and the UOIF, provided intrinsically cross-national spaces of socialisation.

In Paris, two places played a particularly significant role in the structuring of multinational Islamist networks: the Gallieni mosque and the Essalam bookshop. The Gallieni mosque, which is located in the northern part of Paris, hosted monthly conferences. Often taking place over an entire weekend, these conferences not only provided an opportunity for spiritual exercise and ideological training, but also constituted a key moment of social bonding across nationalities and backgrounds. A strong sense of camaraderie would thus emerge from preparing communal meals, sleeping collectively on the mosque's floor and exercising together. Early members of the GIF and the UOIF retain warm memories of these conferences in the Gallieni mosque, stressing the intense quality of pan-Islamic solidarity that they experienced. Another site of cross-national socialisation was the Essalam bookshop. Located near the GIF's Parisian headquarters in the 11^{ème} *arrondissement*, the bookshop was bought by GIF members in order "to spread the Islamic teachings, by providing Islamic books to members of the Muslim community," and generate stable sources of revenue (Abuzayd 2013: 202–03). It served as a sheltered space for intellectual exchanges and social encounters between activists from various backgrounds. In addition to attending activities of the mosque and the bookshop, Muslim activists in Paris gathered in more intimate places such as cafes and personal houses. A member of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, i.e. *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*, who lived temporarily in Paris in the early 1980s, described with admiration the diverse Islamist networks that he encountered (quoted in Abuzayd 2013: 181):

I made sure to attend the study circle led by Sheikh Faysal⁹ in his house in Paris and which resembled [spiritual study] circles held in Arab countries. This circle comprised the elite of the intellectual Muslim youth, coming from all parts of the Arab world: Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq... All of these nationalities were represented in their different faces and their different accents, and in the problems and issues that they were discussing.

Moments of cosmopolitan conviviality were experienced not only in Paris but also in the rest of France, during annual gatherings, holiday camps or weekly conferences (Kepel 1987: 264). Local sections of the UOIF were indeed flourishing at the time, whether in Bordeaux, Lille or Nancy, offering pious Muslim students opportunities to experience a sense of communal affiliation.¹⁰ All of these activities, in the capital and French provinces, contributed to the development of a close-knit multinational community, providing spiritual support and solidary benefits to Muslim activists. Such cohesiveness was also reinforced by the social homogeneity of Muslim political circles in terms of generation, language, race, gender and class. The large majority of them were indeed male students, in their twenties and thirties, coming from the Arab world broadly construed, with a middle-class background and a strong level of literacy. Compared to the majority of Muslim residents who arrived as labour migrants, they came to France as university students to pursue advanced degrees in social sciences, engineering and medicine, all these shared social properties facilitating a sense of faith-based fraternity amongst them.¹¹

The various spaces of socialisation described above (bookshops, gatherings, mosques, etc.) aimed at preserving the Muslim identity of these students during their stay in a non-Muslim country, as well as nurturing their political attachments with the broader Islamic world. According to Kadir*, a former UOIF president of Tunisian descent who was undertaking a doctoral degree in Islamic studies at the Sorbonne at the time, the 1980s were characterised by a strong focus upon Muslim-majority countries:

At this time, there was no European project. Muslim people were living amongst Muslims and this idea that Islam was going to touch upon European reality was non-existent. We were migrants or students living here only temporarily and planning to return to our countries. For young people who were mobilising for some political causes, these causes were still the Muslim world.¹²

Muslim activists substantiated their long-distance political ties with the Muslim world in various ways. On the one hand, they remained closely connected with Muslim-majority countries through intellectual exchanges and circulations. The books that they read and the magazines that they ordered were essentially works written by thinkers influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood abroad.¹³ Unsurprisingly, their own publications dealt almost exclusively with Muslim-world politics.¹⁴ On the other hand, their incorporation of universalised Muslim identities also materialised through political action targeted at foreign Muslim populations and couched in a religious idiom of justification. Muslim activists in France thus organised humanitarian relief campaigns during Bosnian and Palestinian crises while demonstrating in Paris during the Afghanistan War and the Israeli occupation in Lebanon. The activation of solidary networks clarifies the pan-Islamic aspirations driving Muslim activists in France at the time — aspirations which were cultivated in cross-national spaces of socialisation.

Finding a common ground: linguistic, theological, and ritual negotiations across national origin groups

Islamist networks in France provided a tightly knit community for pious activists arriving from different countries. Their diverse origins and common motivations nurtured collective forms of supranational consciousness, which they experienced with one another in their daily activities and in their long-distance activism towards the Muslim world. While many Muslim activists discovered the universality of Islam upon their arrival in France, they realised that cross-national rules were needed for such universality to become concrete.

A good illustration of these activists looking for a common ground is concerned with the Arabic language. Since Islamist networks in France were composed of Arab students coming from North Africa and the Middle East, they shared some linguistic ties. However,

Arabic has significant variations across regions, and spoken Arabic dialects can be difficult to understand between Algerians, Egyptians, Lebanese, and so on.¹⁵ Because of these local differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, Muslim activists resolved to make use of a common language, which they describe as close to *fuṣḥā* Arabic, through the attenuation of colloquial dialects. This is what Abdelfattah*, the Tunisian engineer from Sfax, explains:

We developed a language, a language which is very close to literary Arabic and which is very accessible and very easy. It is understandable by everyone and erases national dialects, and so it does not matter anymore that someone is of an Iraqi, Moroccan, Tunisian, or Egyptian origin.¹⁶

This standardised form of Arabic allowed Muslim activists in France to avoid misunderstandings, since there “are words in Morocco that mean the opposite in Lebanon, hence the need to speak in *fuṣḥā* [literary Arabic] amongst us.”¹⁷ Most importantly, standard Arabic functioned as a tool of membership into the French Islamist milieu, enabling activists to build an inclusive space of action. Progressively, they euphemised their national accents and consciously replaced them with a nationality-neutral Arabic. As Mehdi*, another early member from Lebanon who arrived in France in the early 1980s in order to pursue medical school, recalled: “We were to find a compromise with the use of many words from literary Arabic.”¹⁸ Finding common ways of exchanging in migratory environments has, of course, highly symbolic implications (seeing the world through the same reading grid), and heuristic parallels could be drawn with other migrant groups seeking common linguistic grounds beyond dialectal variations.¹⁹

In addition to the standardisation of language, interactions between activists from diverse national backgrounds created room for theological and ritual accommodations. Mehdi*, the Lebanese medical student quoted above, remembered religious disagreements amongst his fellow activists, suggesting that Algerian members held reactionary pieces of doctrine compared to other members:

Of course, there were some differences in terms of mindset [...]. You have to understand that for pious, educated people, no border exists when faith is a common denominator. But still, I recall that there were long discussions with Algerian scholars and sometimes I did not understand some of the theological choices that they would defend, regarding women or education, for instance. There were some vivid debates in which Sheikh Mawlawi participated in and rebalanced positions.²⁰

While Mehdi* restates the social experience of Islamic universalism in migratory environments (“for pious, educated people, no border exists when faith is a common denominator”), he also hints at antagonisms amongst Muslim activists with respect to theological choices and accounts for the conservative views held by some in national terms (“I recall that there were long discussions with Algerian scholars”).

Moreover, theological divergences were predicated upon competing schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhāhib*). Activists with Muslim Brotherhood sympathies usually encourage the comparative study of *madhāhib* (which are predominant in certain geographical regions) in the name of a single Islamic way. Their migration to France made such comparisons more attractive, with the encounter between members originating from a Maliki background (prevalent in North Africa) and members originating from a Hanafi background (predominant in the Near East). Saad*, the Lebanese accountant who arrived in Paris in 1982, recalled how North African members of Islamist networks progressively abandoned their way of placing their hands on the sides (rather than on their chest) during prayers in the Maliki tradition, aligning with their fellow coreligionists.²¹ In these instances, Muslim activists thus tacitly operated a gradual standardisation of their language, religious opinions, and ritual practices across their different national backgrounds. Such processes of rapprochement were important in order to substantiate supranational claims of belonging and give pan-Islamic aspirations a more concrete existence.

Shifting political agendas and engagement for a French Islam

However, the nurturing of supranational forms of consciousness did not prevent political cleavages based upon national belonging from emerging. In other words, national origin labels retained their relevance despite efforts to create cross-national ties. Such cleavages could take the form of perceived differences in national political cultures, with Moroccan-born members being accused by their fellow activists of being too submissive with respect to political authorities, or Syrian-born followers being blamed for their complicated relationships with intelligence officers.²² However, cleavages based upon national belonging could also emerge with regard to political agendas and strategic priorities. In the early 1980s, two subgroups within Islamist networks in France were particularly active with respect to their home countries: Tunisians and Syrians. While members of the Tunisian Islamic Tendency Movement were fleeing from the harsh repression of Bourguiba's regime, sympathisers of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood faced a severe crackdown by al-Assad's regime, which culminated in the Hama massacre in February 1982. In both cases, Islamist activists from Tunisia and Syria — who arrived in France as either students or political exiles — actively mobilised from Paris, organising demonstrations and launching information campaigns directed towards French officials and media.²³ The UOIF leadership used different mechanisms to accommodate these forms of homeland activism, and ended up introducing an organisational division between “general activities” (*al-A'māl al-āma*), targeted at the entire community of Muslim activists in France, and “regional” or “specialised activities” (*al-A'māl al-Qutriyya*), focusing upon political action directed towards particular foreign countries. This differentiation aimed both at clarifying the division of labour within the Islamist movement and containing political tensions.²⁴

Gradually, though, the UOIF shifted its political agenda, moving away from Muslim-world politics and homeland politics and concentrating upon French Muslim politics instead.

Scholars have traced the metamorphosis of the organisation from an exclusive group of Islamist activists taking France as a contingent territory, to its up-and-coming projects of community building with the objective of anchoring Islam in France (Peter 2006; Amghar 2008). The organisation was determined to publicise this evolution: in 1989, the *Union des organisations islamiques en France* (Union of Islamic Organisations in France) changed its name to the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (Union of Islamic Organisations of France).

Muslim activists embraced a France-oriented agenda for external and internal motivations. As for the external reasons, they were confronted with shrinking opportunities for long-distance activism in the Muslim world as a result of pressures from both their home countries and their host country. For the home countries, state repression peaked in North Africa and the Middle East in the 1980s, forcing Islamist actors underground or into exile and closing the door for grassroots activism in their homelands (Roy 1994; Burgat 2007). Opportunities for returning home decreased while political Islam faced a global period of decline. For the host country (France), securitisation of the UOIF was grounded in suspicions of transnational allegiance. French intelligence officers criticised the organisation for being “close to the Tunisian Islamist party Ennahda and directly tied to active Muslim movements such as the Hamas in the occupied territories”, as well as being “linked, in a more indirect manner, with international leaders such as Turabi in Sudan and some Muslim Brotherhood scholars throughout the world.”²⁵ French and North African regimes thus converged in pushing Muslim activists in France to sever their ties with Muslim-world politics.

In addition to external pressures, Muslim activists resolved to focus upon French Muslim populations because of internal incentives. On the one hand, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the majority of UOIF followers came to realise that what they thought would be a temporary stay for educational purposes would, in fact, extend into a more permanent

settlement. Their motivations for remaining in France were manifold. Some married French women, be they converts to Islam or daughters of Muslim migrant workers. Meanwhile, others were not able to return to their home countries because of the ongoing repression against Islamists. Others, still, decided to pursue their studies and then found employment in France, wherein there were sometimes more employment opportunities in their sector of activity. On the other hand, their settlement in France prompted routine interactions with Muslim families from working-class backgrounds (who constituted the majority of Muslim residents in France). As Abdelfattah* recalls, Muslim activists came in contact with these families for mundane activities, “to look after children, to share information on the nursery, or to support the woman who is giving birth.”²⁶ Exchanges between Muslim activists and lower-class North African workers made the former aware of the religious needs of broader Muslim populations in France, prompting them to refocus their political priorities. Besides, the coming of age of a new generation of French-born activists, berating the first generation of North African migrants (whom they called *blédards*) for their culturally maladapted mentality, accelerated the organisation’s detachment from home-country politics (Haenni 2006).

In response to external and internal changes, UOIF leaders thus espoused a strategy of indigenisation²⁷: they growingly appealed to French-born segments of the Muslim community which they sought to re-Islamicise and endeavoured to couch their message into a French cultural idiom. As such, their progressive embrace of an “Islam of France” challenges any linear account of the de-territorialisation of religions: UOIF leaders articulated their claims to Islamic universality through the breakaway from homeland culture and politics but also, concurrently, through their gradual acculturation to the French context and their activation of a French nationalist rhetoric.

Prioritisation of host-land politics over homeland activism: the Ennahda case

This strategic shift is best exemplified in the handling of a new wave of Tunisian Islamist exiles to France in the early 1990s.²⁸ The influx of Tunisian activists and their families unsettled the political balance of Islamist networks in France, as Ennahda members forcefully advocated for becoming involved in Tunisian politics. As explained by Nizar*, a soft-spoken UOIF member of Tunisian descent who teaches Islamic history in Paris, the political agenda of Ennahda in exile directly conflicted with the UOIF's new commitment towards an Islam of France:

At the beginning, in 81 [the first wave of Ennahda exiles in France], [UOIF and Ennahda members] were working together, but with the time passing, Ennahda followers began to say, "We have a priority, which is the Tunisian cause." But for UOIF followers it is fine discussing these issues, but the new philosophy and orientation is to take care first and foremost of the Islam of France, with Arab causes coming second.²⁹

The "new philosophy" of prioritising French Muslim politics was to be understood against the backdrop of growing pressures imposed by French authorities upon Muslim leaders to provide proof of domestic loyalty. The early 1990s were indeed characterised by growing public concerns surrounding Islam, spurred by concurrent international and domestic developments such as the Rushdie and Headscarf affairs in 1989 and the First Gulf War in 1990 (Deltombe 2005; Bowen 2009). In reaction to French policies designed to "nationalise" Islam, the UOIF leadership was thus enticed to keep its distance from Muslim-world politics. Hicham*, the Moroccan-born organisation's president at the time, recalls the frictions arising from these conflicting priorities:

We did not want our Brothers from Ennahda to use the organisation, which was designed to serve one main cause: Muslims of France. We told them: "It is very simple: go and create your own association." There was a clash between us and them and it is

only a decade later that they realised that they were wrong. If they had used the UOIF, they would have deprived [French] Muslims of an important asset.³⁰

Political disagreements between Ennahda and UOIF followers in France reveal the potentially contradictory interests at work within Islamist networks. The migration in France of activists coming from different national backgrounds thus lay bare the competing partisan cultures running through the Islamist movement.

An apple of discord between Ennahda and UOIF followers lay in the importance given to spirituality and ideological training. Ennahda followers were accused by their UOIF fellow activists of neglecting their spiritual duties and obligations to God in favour of political activism. In the words of Hicham*: “We were reproaching them for conflating political action with religious action.”³¹ Ennahda followers were thus blamed for being “less spiritual” and not attending their spiritual discussions in the “family” (*usra*) — the core organisational unit of the Muslim Brotherhood movement (al-Anani 2016). Besides, some Ennahda followers even critiqued the *usra* system as being archaic and impenetrable.³² In addition to the lesser emphasis placed upon spirituality, Ennahda members were criticised by their UOIF counterparts for promoting mixed-gender spaces of activism. In Ennahda circles, men and women were allowed to work together as long as they respected the rules of Islamic decency, thereby calling into question the strict gender segregation enforced in UOIF activities at the time. Correlatively, the Ennahda movement accepted women as full members, which UOIF followers saw as a sign of moral leniency (*laxisme*).³³ Finally, Ennahda followers were criticised for cooperating with Tunisian leftist leaders in exile despite their professed secularism. This strategical openness, as justified in theological terms by Ennahda political and spiritual leader Rachid Ghannouchi, met with disapproval on the part of some UOIF followers.³⁴

According to Saad*, an early participant of French Islamist networks quoted above, these frictions progressively undermined the communication between Ennahda and UOIF

followers. The latter finally resolved to establish a strict separation between the two types of activism:

Tunisians were always apart from the group. There were a few Tunisians who remain with us [at the UOIF], such as Abdallah [Ben Mansour], Abu Hatim [Ahmed Jaballah] and Abderrahman [Mokhtar Jaballah],³⁵ so every time we wanted to discuss with the Tunisians but failed to do so, we would send them our own Tunisian members. [...] But they suffered too much, to the extent that we finally said: “Well, you are now exterior to our circles — we do not retain you in our group anymore.”³⁶

The clash thus ended with the exclusion of Ennahda followers from the UOIF, who organised their own structures of activism independently from the UOIF, with a few exceptions.³⁷ This historical sequence — which has remained under the radar of scholarly enquiry thus far — epitomises the ideological, organisational and political diversity at work within Islamist networks. Such diversity runs counter to the widespread characterisations of these networks as being politically homogenous, with their strategies remaining coloured by the peculiar situation of national origin groups. Furthermore, the sequence highlights how forms of transnational mobilisation that were tolerated by French public authorities in the 1980s became a political liability for UOIF members in the early 1990s because of growing public anxieties surrounding Islam and immigration. As a result, Muslim activists were conflicted about working methods and political objectives, pointing to the difficult management of loyalties beyond borders.

The renationalisation of Muslim activism and the reality test of the Algerian Civil War

The prioritisation of domestic activism over homeland politics in the Tunisian case had broader implications for the UOIF’s trajectory. In the aftermath of their conflictual relations with Ennahda followers, UOIF leaders established clear rules in respect of cooperation with

foreign Islamist movements. This is what Abdelfattah* recounts, who was serving as the general secretary of the organisation at the time:

It was a critical moment. I was even assaulted physically, because I refused that the UOIF functions as a vehicle or an extension for strictly Tunisian or Egyptian claims. I told them that it would compromise the objective of the UOIF, which is to take care of the [French] Muslim community. [...] I banned anti-government stands in the Bourget [where the annual gathering of the UOIF has taken place since the early 1990s], whatever the government is. I even refused that Palestinians speak out against Israel! [...] And for Tunisians, I refused that stands could be used to insult Ben Ali. [...] And thank God everyone in the UOIF agreed that the UOIF should not become a tribune for foreign claims.³⁸

Abdelfattah's* words illustrate the growing autonomy of the UOIF from homeland politics and the political refocusing of its activities upon the French Muslim community. As such, UOIF leaders chose to limit the logistical, financial and moral support that they were providing for long-distance activism in the face of growing security pressures.

The severing of ties with the Muslim world in general and with homelands in particular is also vividly expressed by Wassim*, a UOIF leader of Tunisian descent who arrived in the South of France in the mid-1970s in order to follow his parents (his father worked in the industrial sector). Wassim* highlights how the UOIF gradually adopted a French character in place of a North African or Middle Eastern identity:

The arrival of Ennahda activists was decisive in one aspect. It made us realise that we were facing a crucial choice: will we embark upon the politics of the Islamic movements in our home countries or will we focus upon Muslims of France? They made us aware of this choice, not by lecturing us, but because they were so deeply enmeshed in Tunisian politics that it pushed us to react quickly — not fiercely, but with firmness: “No, we are not here to work for Tunisia, or for Morocco, or for Egypt. We are here for France.” [...] This moment pushed us to form an identity for ourselves, since we refused

to borrow a Tunisian, an Egyptian, a Syrian or a Saudi identity. [...] We started singing France and Frenchness, while [Ennahda followers] kept singing another song, which did not hurt us but which did not feel right for us.³⁹

According to Wassim*, prioritising France-oriented activism thus presented challenges regarding the management of long-distance political allegiances. However, it also allowed UOIF members to present themselves as nationally loyal activists, at a time when suspicions of dual allegiance were running high in French public opinion.

Interestingly, this process of renationalisation went hand in hand with mechanisms of French acculturation. Language played an important part in their efforts to “sing France and Frenchness”, to use Wassim’s* expression, with UOIF followers Francising their sermons, translating Islamic manuals and producing various cultural artefacts (books, magazines, video cassettes) into French. In the shadow of security pressures to prove their national allegiance and cultural assimilation, UOIF followers also exercised their patriotism through various ordinary and extraordinary gestures such as applying for French citizenship, displaying the French flag in public meetings or participating in the French Army.

Their detachment from homeland politics and, correlatively, their new credentials of French loyalty were tested quickly by the Algerian Civil War. The outbreak of the war in 1991 consolidated hostile public discourses in France with respect to Islam and immigration, reinvigorating fears of internal terrorist threats and casting a shadow of suspicion over everything Islamic (Silverstein 2004: 9). At first, the UOIF leadership supported the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its legal ascent to power, calling for other nations to respect the Algerian electoral results.⁴⁰ They even invited FIS representatives in France, the Algerian Fraternity in France (FAF), to the UOIF annual gathering, wherein they were enthusiastically applauded.⁴¹

However, several ominous developments led UOIF leaders to reconsider their supportive stance. The violent escalation of the Algerian conflict in 1991, including the use

of terrorist actions, brought strong public condemnation on the part of the UOIF leadership, while the growing securitisation of Algerian Islamists in France functioned as an effective deterrent. Eighty-eight FAF members were arrested in 1993, and sixteen others were detained in the following year by French authorities (Lamloun 2001). Meanwhile, FAF leaders were deported from France and pro-Islamist press was censored by the French Interior Ministry. Those developments meant that the UOIF's initial support for the FIS swiftly became an issue of embarrassment, and the organisation's leadership quickly established a critical distance from the Algerian Islamists. As stated by the UOIF president at the time in a press interview: "We do not accept Islamic militants into our ranks, and our principle is simple: we are in France and we respect French soil and French law."⁴² The UOIF proceeded to "sanitise" its membership by casting out controversial elements. Some UOIF members who were publicly advocating for the FIS were excluded from the movement, including high-ranking leaders.⁴³ This is what Wassim* explains, placing emphasis upon the fact that the Algerian Civil War strengthened the reorientation of the UOIF agenda towards France and away from homeland politics:

We imposed a rule on Algerians in our ranks: "We do not care about your allegiance overseas — you deal with it on your own — but [in France] you work for the UOIF to achieve the UOIF objectives." Some people thanked us later for being inflexible on this issue.⁴⁴

As such, the Algerian Civil War and its repercussions upon French soil forced UOIF leaders to renew their commitment to French Islam. It also incentivised them to assert their independence from the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which they came to understand in terms of a shared school of thought rather than any formal membership.⁴⁵

Importantly, prioritising France-oriented activism allowed UOIF members to present themselves as nationally embedded activists, with "only one political loyalty — France."⁴⁶ This argument represented a crucial trope in the claims to political recognition articulated

by UOIF leaders, who used their renewed commitments to France for distinguishing themselves in the competitive French Islamic landscape and criticising their Muslim rivals (such as the Great mosque of Paris or the National Federation of French Muslims) for their ties to foreign powers.⁴⁷ What is more, their refocusing on France anticipated the reorientation of the French government towards state-Islam relations, from the Embassy Islam described above to an ambition to regain control of Islamic affairs on French soil and minimise foreign influence on domestic populations. Such reorientation was enacted in the setting up by the French Interior Ministry of a representative body in 1999, in which UOIF leaders were co-opted, testifying the success of their strategy of Francisation.⁴⁸

Conclusion: national loyalties in internationalist movements

Sharing a reformist understanding of the Scriptures, communicating in standardised Arabic, participating in the same discussion circles, attending conferences and holiday camps together, and mobilising for foreign Muslim populations — all of these activities allowed Muslim activists from different national backgrounds to forge a sense of participation in the Islamic universal message. Upon their arrival in France, as students or political exiles, they experienced the universality of Islam in their daily interactions, witnessing how their faith served as a moral unifier across political borders. While these activities promoted a feeling of membership in the global *umma*, they did not prevent tensions resulting from different national traditions and cultural backgrounds. Such tensions sometimes concerned specific religious opinions (with Algerians being presented by some as holding more conservative views on women) or conflicting political cultures (with Moroccans being accused by their fellow activists of political submissiveness). However, the most salient tensions that touched upon national belonging were concerned with the movement's agenda: should it prioritise homeland politics, as advocated by some Tunisian activists of Ennahda and some Algerian

supporters of the FIS, or should it focus upon host-land politics, as the majority of UOIF members came to defend?

In this respect, this article sought to deconstruct any romanticised view of transnational Islamism as being a unified social movement in which national identifications eroded under imperatives of pan-Islamic solidarity. If supranational aspirations played a decisive role in the socialisation of Muslim activists in France, national origin labels retained their relevance in practice. Not only did these labels stand out in fiercely debated disagreements about strategic priorities, they also emerged in day-to-day discussions. To quote Nizar* in describing the social division of labour within Islamist networks and taking pride in his Tunisian-ness: “There is a common saying within Islamist movements that stresses that Tunisians are often thinkers, while Moroccans are often managers.”⁴⁹ What is more, far from embracing a global, de-culturalised Islamic identity through their distancing from homeland politics and their espousal of pan-Islamic ideals, UOIF followers developed a new nationalist framework over time, that of their host country France. Their universalist creed of Islamic solidarity hence progressively came to be channelled into particularistic projects of national incorporation, with Muslim leaders pledging allegiance to France and imbuing their message with French cultural markers.⁵⁰ Put differently, their migration and exile did not prompt a process of de-localisation and de-culturalisation of Islam; rather, it spurred the cultivation of new nationally-bounded claims, this time couched into a French idiom of identification. The case study of early Muslim activists in France hence sheds light on the ambivalent role played by internationalist movements in national identity formation, pointing to the resilience of nationally-bounded attachments in movements that precisely aspire to supersede national boundaries.

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- ¹ The aspiration for communal affiliation characterising the *umma* is not specific to Islamists. What is specific, however, is the way in which this notion gained a normative content and became articulated as a political project in the face of antagonism (Mandaville 2001).
- ² The networks under study share indirect descent from the Muslim Brotherhood, arguably the oldest and largest Islamist movement in the Arab world. While the term “Islamists” allows to capture their distant lineage with the Muslim Brotherhood, it would be misleading to regard France-based networks as clones of their Arab counterparts. As such, I also use the expression “Muslim activists” to refer to them, since some individuals were not acquainted with Islamist movements in their home-country and because, once in France, they engaged in Muslim identity politics with no agenda of state transformation.
- ³ O’Brien (2018: 2) distinguishes between internationalism and transnationalism: “Whereas internationalism implies a political stance or orientation, transnationalism refers to an activity or action. Transnationalism has a technocratic ring to it with its focus on strategies and tactics whereas internationalism raises more philosophical questions about the nature of community across state boundaries.” I redeploy this distinction by using “internationalism” (interchangeably with the word “cosmopolitanism”) to refer to normative ideals, and “transnationalism” to refer to cross-national trajectories and practices.
- ⁴ In some respects, the article restates the binding power of national constraints in the face of overly linear accounts of transnationalism which routinely stress the intensification of communication in goods, information and people and anticipate the advent of a global, self-organising civil society (for a critical review of the literature, see Siméant 2010).
- ⁵ France is one of many extraterritorial places offering opportunities for likeminded Islamists to meet. Saudi Arabia has long represented a hub for Muslim Brothers in exile, welcoming Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Sudanese, and Palestinian Brothers fleeing repression in their home countries since the 1960s (Lacroix 2011). Furthermore, Istanbul and London have also served as contact zones for Islamist activists from different countries.
- ⁶ Interview with Nadir*, Bordeaux, August 2016. The interviews quoted in this article were conducted in French and all translations are my own.
- ⁷ Interview with Saad*, Paris, October 2016.
- ⁸ Interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, December 2015.
- ⁹ Faysal Mawlawi (1941–2011) was a high-profile Lebanese intellectual and judge who played a significant role in the ideological consolidation of Islamist networks in France, wherein he resided occasionally throughout the 1980s, fleeing political turmoil in Lebanon.
- ¹⁰ With smaller numbers of individuals from the same nationality in each city, local dynamics were conducive to cross-national friendships.
- ¹¹ For a more detailed account on these social characteristics and class dynamics within French Muslim population, see Dazey 2019.
- ¹² Interview with Kadir*, Paris, May 2017.
- ¹³ With regard to the consumption of an imported Islamist literature in France, see Lahlou (2018: 28–9). As for magazines, interviewees notably mentioned *Da‘wa*, the official publication of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and *al-Mujtama‘*, a Kuwaiti weekly magazine edited by the local Brotherhood’s branch.
- ¹⁴ Their publications, all in Arabic, included the journal *at-Taqrīr*, the magazine *al-Insān* and the monthly review *al-Ghurabā’* (the latter edited in London by the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe, the newly established European umbrella organisation with Muslim Brotherhood lineages).
- ¹⁵ One Lebanese student recalls his surprise when discovering Maghrebi spoken dialects in France: “When I came to France, I had never met any North African in my life, so I came and asked, ‘Where is the mosque?’, and I was told, ‘It is here, Paris 5th’. It was my first Friday [the day of Islamic congregational prayer]. I enter the place and a gentleman speaks to me; it looks like Arabic but it is not Arabic. I thought: ‘Well, he must be Iranian.’ His language looks like Arabic but I understand nothing at all. After a while I hear a second person and a third and I tell myself, ‘Say, there are only Iranians here!’ [laughs]. For me, North Africans were Iranians because they spoke a language amongst themselves of which I did not understand a word, so when we met in the GIF, this is precisely why we spoke *fuṣṣḥā* [modern standard Arabic] between ourselves. Otherwise, no one would understand the other” (interview with Saad*, Paris, October 2016).
- ¹⁶ Interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, December 2015.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Saad*, Paris, October 2016.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Mehdi*, Bordeaux, November 2016.
- ¹⁹ This is, for instance, the case amongst Latino groups in the United States, who ended up crafting an “accent-less” Spanish language understandable by all Hispanics (Rodriguez 1999: 90).
- ²⁰ Interview with Mehdi*, Bordeaux, November 2016.
- ²¹ Interview with Saad*, Paris, October 2016.

- 22 Abdelfattah's* discussion of the political submissiveness of Moroccan UOIF members illustrates the essentialising potential of such national origin labels: "Moroccans have a culture of compromise to the profit of authority, because Hassan II and the Moroccan State have more or less trained them not to oppose authority, to always negotiate and always accept what the authority wants. They call it the *makhzen*. It is sometimes almost a natural response for them, so when I defy a minister or the government and say that this disposition is illegal, for them it is something utterly unthinkable" (interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, February 2016).
- 23 Interviews with Abdelfattah*, Paris, February 2016 and Sami*, Paris, October 2016. On Syria, see *Le Monde*, 13 February 1982 and *Le Monde*, 16 September 1982. On Tunisia, see Ayari 2007 and Zederman 2018.
- 24 Interview with Wassim*, Marseille, July 2017.
- 25 French national archives, Ministry of Interior, Box 19970374/4, Batch 1, Briefing note "*L'Islam et l'Islamisme en France*", dated 29 May 1995.
- 26 Interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, February 2016.
- 27 What scholars of diaspora politics would call a shift from homeland politics to immigrant politics (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003).
- 28 Tunisian Islamists of the Islamic Tendency Movement (which later became Ennahda) were heavily repressed by Bourguiba's regime in 1981 and 1987. The arrival of Ben Ali to power in 1987 led to a temporary political respite, followed by a repressive crackdown after Ennahda's electoral victory in 1989. This crackdown prompted hundreds of families to take refuge in France and elsewhere in Europe and Canada (Dazey and Zederman 2017).
- 29 Interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016.
- 30 Interview with Hicham*, Paris, October 2016.
- 31 Interview with Hicham*, Paris, October 2016.
- 32 Interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016.
- 33 Interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016.
- 34 Interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016.
- 35 Several leaders of Islamist networks in France used Arabic nicknames (*kuniyya*), as per the Islamic tradition; for instance, Ahmed Jaballah, one of the UOIF founders, was referred to as Abu Hatim, "father of Hatim".
- 36 Interview with Saad*, Paris, October 2016.
- 37 A few individuals chose to remain active in both Ennahda and the UOIF, balancing the conflicting schedules and diverging agendas of the two organisations. Nizar*, one of these multi-positioned activists, recalls: "I was both with the UOIF and with Ennahda. [...]. Ennahda, it is the Tunisian cause, the issue of liberty, while the UOIF is about Islam in France. It was sometimes difficult to combine both, because they are both noble causes. But instead of prioritising them, I tried to combine them. But it was difficult because sometimes the meetings were happening at the time." (interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016). His words highlight the possible layering of activist identities, which has to be understood from a situational perspective: depending upon the context, the same activist could choose to prioritise his homeland commitment or his host-land engagement, pointing to the importance of hyphenated identities in migratory environments.
- 38 Interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, February 2016.
- 39 Interview with Wassim*, Marseille, July 2017.
- 40 Interview with Yusuf*, Lille, March 2017. See also Abdallah Ben Mansour's interview in *Le Monde*, 1 January 1992.
- 41 French national archives, Ministry of Interior, Box 20050487/10, Intelligence report "*Le XVI^{ème} congrès de l'UOIF*", 19 April 1999.
- 42 Lhaj Thami Breze quoted in *Sud-Ouest*, 12 November 1993.
- 43 Interview with Abdelfattah*, Paris, September 2016.
- 44 Interview with Wassim*, Marseille, June 2017.
- 45 To quote one of the many UOIF leaders who expressed this idea: "Certainly the UOIF has an ideological filiation and some of the first members were Muslim Brothers in their home countries but it doesn't mean that the UOIF is affiliated with the *Jamā'a* of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo" (interview with Yazid*, Lille, March 2017).
- 46 Abdallah Ben Mansour, the UOIF general secretary at the time, interviewed in the evening news broadcast of Antenne 2, 29 December 1991, quoted in Deltombe 2005: 266.
- 47 Interestingly, Turkish-origin Islamist leaders in Germany use similar arguments, portraying themselves as indispensable promoters of German integration and denouncing the extra-territorial loyalties of Embassy-Islam representatives (Laurence 2012: 73).

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- ⁴⁸ For an analysis of the trajectory of the UOIF and its relations with state authorities throughout the 2000s, see Geisser 2006 and Peter 2006. For comparative insights with other Islamist-inspired organisations in Europe and their gradual incorporation into their institutional national setting, see Laurence 2012, Chapter 7.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Nizar*, Paris, September 2016.
- ⁵⁰ Such trajectory of indigenisation parallels that of other Muslim groups in transnational environments (Laurence 2012; Merdjanova 2013; Piscatori and Saikal 2019).