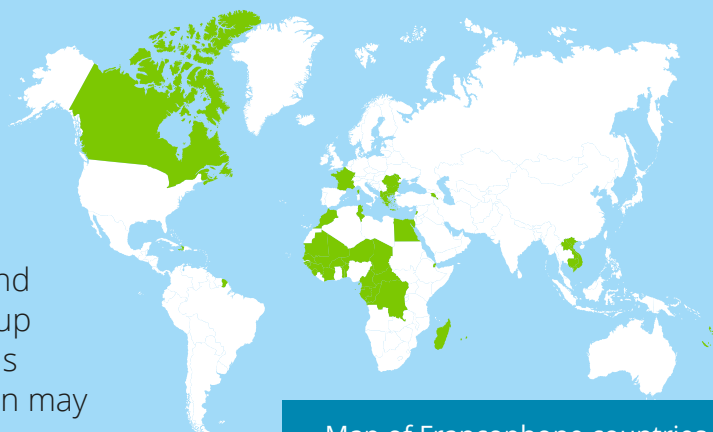


# Exploring the Islamic influence on French culture and language

## INTRODUCTION

There are many Muslims around the world who live in countries where French is a national language. These countries include France, countries in North and West Africa such as Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Djibouti, Senegal, Mali, Mauritania and Niger, as well as Egypt, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg and Canada. In many of these countries children grow up speaking other languages alongside French, such as Arabic or other local languages. Sometimes children may speak French at school and another language at home and they grow up bilingual, and sometimes even multilingual.

You might learn about these countries as part of *La Francophonie* (French-speaking countries). Some people say that grouping countries together in this way, when French is just **one** of the languages spoken, ignores the other native languages in those countries. They say this encourages the idea of French as the dominant language and culture. This is important to think about when we consider France's history of colonialism.



Map of Francophone countries.

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July 29, 2015. Champs-Élysées in Paris, France.

## FRENCH MUSLIMS

This Ramadan, let's have a closer look at Muslim life in France. Around five million people in France identify as Muslim and the majority belong to the Sunni denomination. Many originate from countries in North-West Africa, West Africa and the Middle East, where French is also spoken. There are around 2,300 mosques in France compared with around 1,500 in the UK. The first Muslims came to France centuries ago and, importantly, the French have also been in Muslim countries for the same amount of time. The French Muslim population is mostly concentrated in the large cities of Paris, Marseille and Lyon.



Paris, France. French Arab Muslims demonstrating against discrimination, Islamophobia and racism.



## RAMADAN IN FRANCE

In France in 2022, Ramadan will begin on 2 April in the evening and will end approximately a month later upon the sighting of the new moon crescent. Ramadan is a holy month for Muslims all over the world and is one of the five pillars of Islam. A big part of Ramadan is about self-reflection, prayer, refraining from certain activities, and having empathy for others who are hungry and suffering. During Ramadan, the times at which the daily prayers occur, and the fasting begins and ends, change every year depending on sunrise and sunset. The pre-dawn meal is called *suhoor* and the meal after sunset is called *iftar*. Every year the Great Mosque of Paris publishes the schedule for Paris and the northern cities of France and in the south the Great Mosque of Lyon publishes the schedule for the southern cities of France. The fasting period ends with Eid al-Fitr, when people come together in large groups to share a big meal with their community.



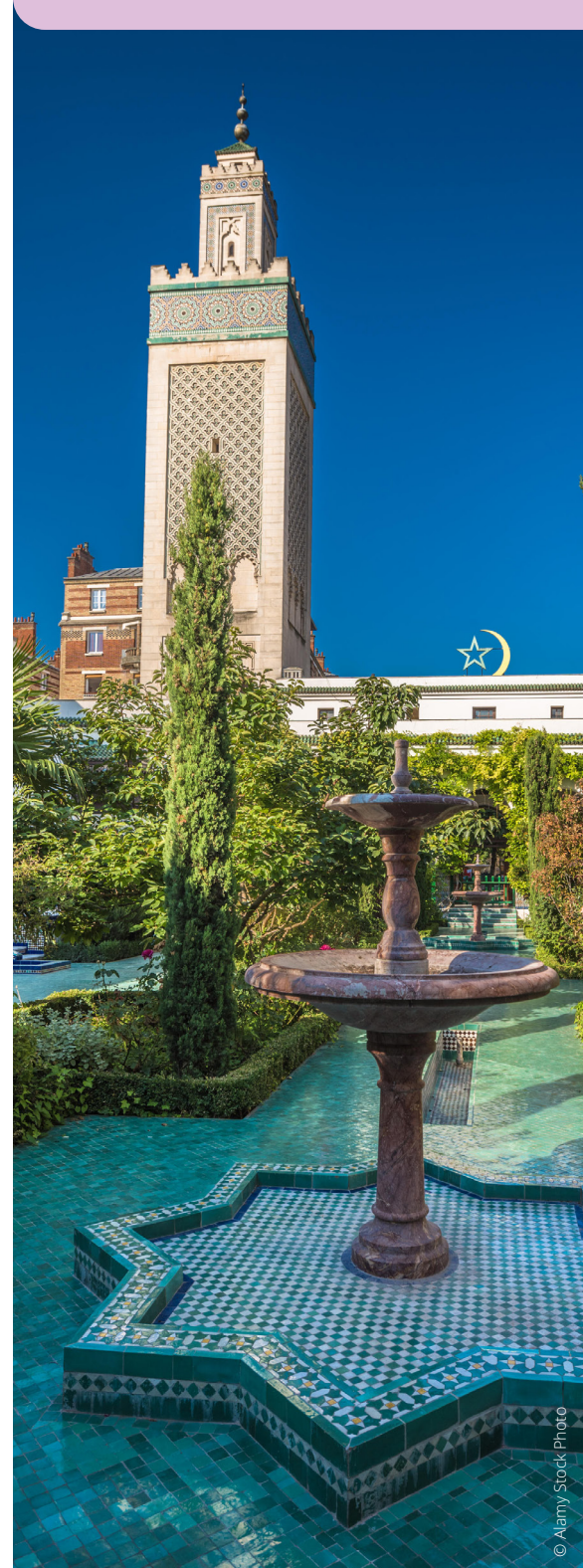
July 10, 2013. Paris France. A family breaks the day's fast with the Iftar meal on the first day of the Muslim fasting month, Ramadan.



July 10, 2013. Paris, France. Street vendors sell traditional sweets and snacks, for the Iftar meal with which the day's fast is broken, on the first day of the Muslim month of Ramadan.

## Reflection

What else do you know about Ramadan?



Paris, France. Built in 1926, the Grande Mosquée de Paris (Great Mosque), located in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, is one of the largest mosques in France.



## SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL ACTION

Ramadan isn't just about fasting, Muslims participate in *Sadaqua*, voluntary acts of giving, which are particularly important during Ramadan. In Paris, for example, there are two organisations *Une Chorba pour Tous* (A Chorba for All) and *Le Secours Islamique* (Muslim Aid Society), which distribute food to homeless people, shelters and families. Every year at the end of the fasting period, the Great Mosque of Lyon usually hosts a free meal for 200–300 people for Eid al-Fitr. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this mass gathering has not taken place in the last two years but there are hopes it will return for 2022!

Great Mosque of Lyon, Bron, France.

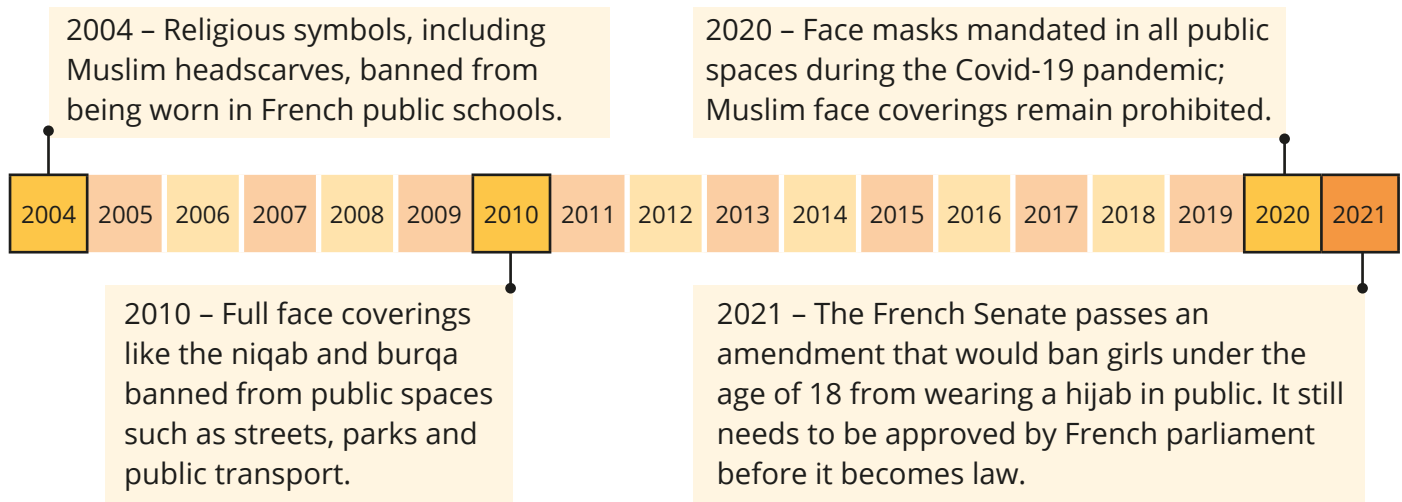


September 8, 2008. Paris, France. Volunteers serve meals to the needy at the non-profit "Une Chorba Pour Tous" (soup for everyone) soup kitchen in a tent outside a public housing project. For the holy month of Ramadan, a soup kitchen has opened outside Cite Edmond Michelet, a tough public housing project in Paris' notorious 19th arrondissement.



## Laïcité

French *laïcité* can be a tricky concept to grasp because we don't have an equivalent in the UK. Sometimes it is translated as 'secularism', which is the belief that religious institutions and the state should be separate. However, French *laïcité* laws around the role of religion in public life are particularly strict in comparison with other European countries such as the UK, and they have often been criticised for being discriminatory against those who wish to practise their religion, and in particular against Muslims. This is expressed most visibly in the French laws on face coverings.



Muslim women around the world have their say on the proposed hijab ban in France. Check out the hashtag [#handsoffmyhijab](#) on TikTok, or the French equivalent [#touchedepasamonhijab](#).

Muslims and human rights defenders say these laws deny Muslim women the right to choose and are oppressive and hostile towards Muslims. Many Muslim women also argue that this is a symptom of the Islamophobia that many Muslims experience in France and is reminiscent of the erasure of Muslim identity by the French in Algeria to establish control during colonial rule. In 2010, the human rights organisation Amnesty International said, "A complete ban on the covering of the face would violate the rights to freedom of expression and religion of those women who wear the burqa or the niqab as an expression of their identity or beliefs." On the other hand, French politicians say that the ban is empowering for women and important for national security.

### Reflection

Watch these reports on the [niqab ban](#) and more recently the [proposed hijab ban](#) and discuss: What is your opinion on French *laïcité*? What do you think about France's approach to face coverings?



Paris, France. French Muslims protesting against discrimination, Islamophobia, and racism.



January 17, 2004. Brussels, Belgium. About 900 people were protesting against a ban on wearing Islamic headscarves (hijab) in France and some of Belgium's schools, and a proposal to extend the ban to all schools in some regions of the country.



## Famous French Muslims



### Paul Pogba

Paul Pogba is a professional French footballer who plays for the French national team and Manchester United. He now lives in England but was born and grew up in Lagny-sur-Marne, a Parisian suburb. His mother was a practising Muslim but she did not raise her children in the Muslim faith. It was as an adult that Paul began to connect with his faith, which he said has made him a better person. After experiencing some personal struggles, he tried praying with his Muslim friends, which he says made him feel good and, in 2019, he committed to his faith and made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Paul has spoken out about how Islam is misunderstood and misrepresented in the media: "Islam is not the image that everyone

sees, terrorism. What we hear in the media is really something else." He also said, "It made me change, realise things in life. I guess, maybe, it makes me more peaceful inside. It was a good change in my life. It's really a religion that has opened my mind and that makes me, maybe, a better person."



### Rama Yade

Rama Yade is a French politician. She has served as French Secretary of Human Rights and has written several books. She was born in Senegal and moved to France when she was eight years old. In 2007 she said, "I embody everything that politicians are not: a woman, young, Black and Muslim." She describes herself as a moderate-conservative politician and in 2009 said she was "not opposed to the burqa ban". She argued that she would be open to a ban if it was aimed at protecting women who were forced to wear the burqa. French Muslim women who opposed the ban said that real freedom for women is allowing them to choose.



### Médine

Médine is a French rapper of Algerian descent. He is a part of the Parisian hip-hop collective *Din Records*, who have sold record numbers of their albums in France. The band make 'conscious hip-hop' and most of their songs are against racism and terrorism with content based on the hardship of growing up as a migrant in France. They are proud of their Muslim identities and say that their music is in solidarity with Muslims around the world and all those who experience oppression. Médine said, "Other rap bands are united by drugs, but we are united by prayers."

Following the French riots of 2005, in which young people from the migrant communities of the Parisian suburbs protested against police brutality, social inequality and lack of opportunities, Médine wrote an article for *Time* magazine about his experiences of the inequalities faced by people like him from the Parisian suburbs. He said, "The people who live in projects like those where last week's riots raged are treated as second-class citizens. We have less access to the rights and services of the Republic – schools are run down; job opportunities are remote. Islam is an enormous part of who I am, just as being French is. The two aren't in opposition. I was born and raised in France. I've been a citizen since birth. How much more French can I be?"





### Philippe Grenier

Philippe Grenier (1865-1944) was the first Muslim elected to French Parliament. He was a doctor from the small town of Pontarlier, who converted to Islam after travelling to Algeria. When he was there, he condemned the violent behaviour of the French colonial troops and vowed to fight for the Algerian people in French parliament. Despite being labelled a 'madman' by French newspapers, Philippe Grenier was liked by the French public, who were convinced by the strong arguments he made in his speeches, which he always began with the Arabic *Alhamdulillah* (All praise be to God), and he was elected into Parliament in 1896.



### Amel Bent

Amel Bent is the most famous singer to come from the French TV show *Nouvelle Star*. She is currently a judge on the show *The Voice: la plus belle voix*. Amel grew up in the Parisian suburb of La Courneuve, where she lived with her brother and her Moroccan mother and Algerian father. Her most popular song is *Ma philosophie* from her album *Un jour d'été*. Apart from her musical career, she has acted in various TV shows and films and also appeared on the TV show *Danse avec les stars*. In an interview in 2021, Amel spoke about her relationship with Islam, which she says is a very important part of her family life.

### Reflection

Can you translate the French names of the TV shows and musical titles to the left?



### Leila Bekhti

Leila Bekhti is a French-Algerian actress, who has appeared in many films and TV shows. Her most famous film is *Tout ce qui brille*, which was released in 2010 and sold more than 1.3 million tickets. She has won many awards for her acting. In 2019, she used her platform to speak out about the controversies surrounding the banning of the veil. On her Instagram account she posted a message which said, "I am not used to expressing myself on social issues, but it is difficult for me to stay silent in the midst of such an oppressive atmosphere. I am alarmed by the hatred and rejection spreading through society. A way of living together exists, we must spread this message."

### Reflection

Which celebrity do you find the most interesting? Why?



## LANGUAGE

Middle Eastern culture and the Arabic language have had a huge impact in Europe, and French culture and language are no exception. Up to 700 words in French have an Arabic origin, some via Spanish. Here are some of the most commonly used words. What are these words in English? Can you match them up with the Arabic word from which it originates?

French	Arabic
café	zarāfa
sucre	jubba
coton	al-kuhūl
magasin	qahwa
girafe	orz
alcool	sukkar
jupe	qutun
riz	makāzin

*The Arabic language has its own alphabet and words are not written this way in Arabic. The words listed here are called 'transliterations'. They are a way for speakers of English to understand the pronunciation of Arabic words.*

## ALGERIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Also known as the Algerian Revolution, the Algerian War of Independence was a seven-year war between the French military and the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN). In 1962, it ended with a truce and Algerian independence from French colonial rule which had begun in 1830, and lasted over 130 years.

French colonial rule in Algeria changed over time, but it is estimated that around one million white Europeans lived in Algeria during this time. They came to become known as *pieds-noirs* (black feet) because they wore shoes, whereas the native Muslim people did not. During the occupation, the French enforced the idea of Algeria as French land and an integral part of France and attempted to erase Muslim identity by cracking down on mosques and religious schools. The French also established laws which made Algerian Muslims second-class citizens, whilst the French settlers and the Jewish Algerians were granted citizenship status, allowing them a much better quality of life. These laws allowed the French colonisers to steal Algerian land and use it for French agricultural and farming purposes. Algerian Muslims could gain citizenship if they denounced their Muslim faith and converted to Christianity, but despite this, most cases were still rejected.



Algerian FLN troops parade through Algiers during the Algerian War, July 1962.

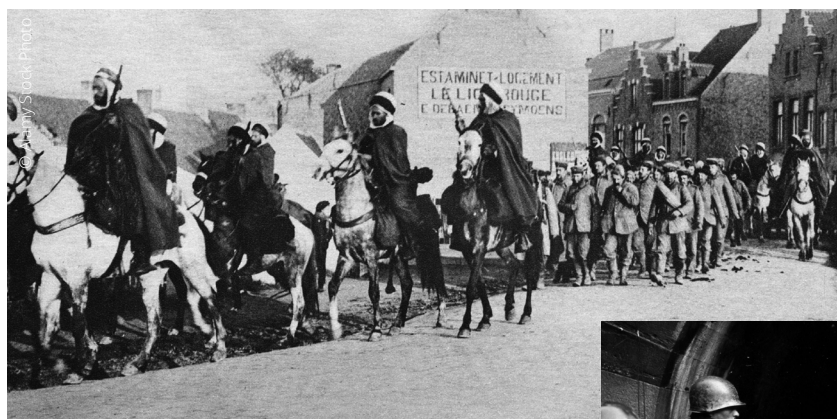


During the Second World War, 250,000 Algerians fought for the French troops. Yet, when Algerians took to the streets to celebrate the defeat of the Nazis and demand independence from France, the French military responded to the uprising by opening fire on the streets, killing up to 45,000 Algerians. After this, pockets of Algerian resistance grew, and this was followed by brutal suppression by the French army. One of these resistance groups, the FLN, now a major movement, entered the independence war with the French in 1956. It is known as one of the bloodiest and most violent wars in history, with tactics of terrorism and torture used by both sides. By the end of the war, one million Algerians are believed to have lost their lives, compared with French loss of life at around 100,000.



F.L.N. (National Liberation Front) soldiers 1954-1962 in France during the Algerian War of Independence.

Many French Algerians say that an understanding of what happened during the war and of the colonial era crimes is crucial for mending relations with Algeria and the 500,000 French Algerians living in France today, many of whom feel they are second-class citizens.

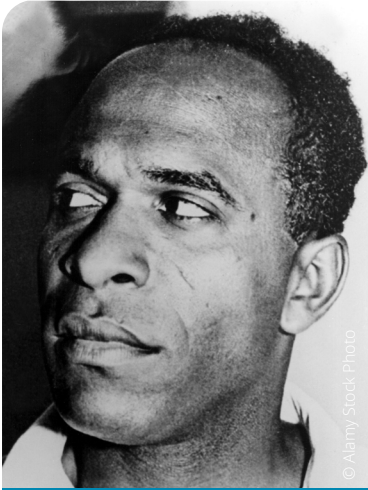


1914-1918. The Algerian cavalry, attached to the French Army during World War I, leading German prisoners of war, captured west of Belgium.

November 25, 1944. Troops of the 2nd Algerian Division in Belfort (France).







Frantz Fanon (1925-1961).

### Frantz Fanon

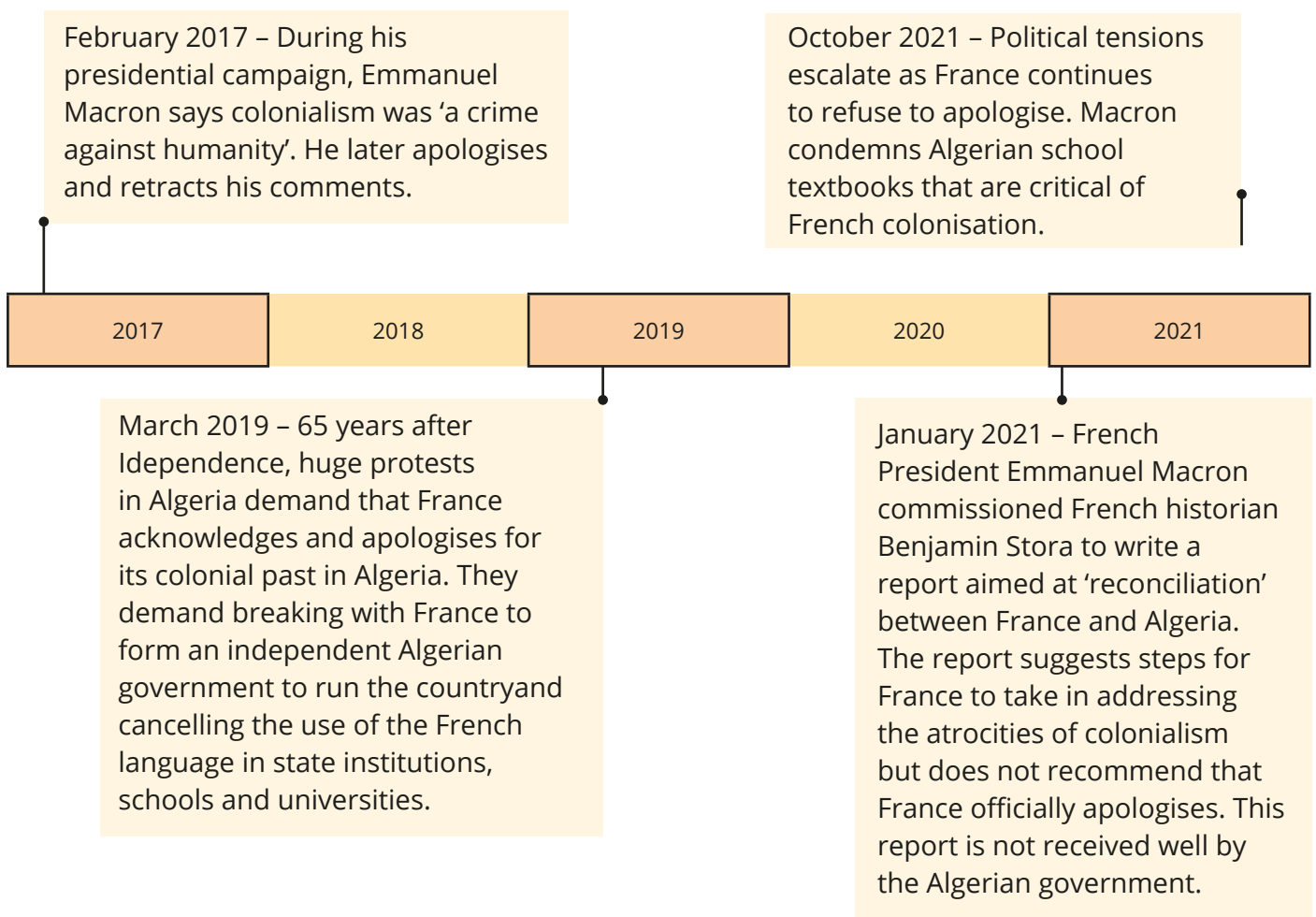
Frantz Fanon was an influential psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique, a former French colony in the Caribbean. In 1953 he moved to Algeria to work with the traumatised French soldiers during the Algerian war; this is where he formed much of his political ideas. He was pro-independence and joined the FLN. Of the war he said, "When we revolt it's not for a particular culture. We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe."

#### Reflection

What do you think he meant by this?

## TOWARDS RECONCILIATION?

Two nations whose histories are interwoven, yet a huge divide still exists.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

- What is your opinion on the use of the term *La Francophonie* to refer to countries in which French is one of the languages spoken?
- France is home to the largest number of Muslims in Europe – about four million. Does this surprise you? If so, why?
- What do you think about French *laïcité* laws? What about the ban on Muslim face coverings?
- Have you ever tried fasting before? What was it like or what do you think it would be like? Why do Muslims believe it brings them closer to God?
- Which French Algerian celebrities would you like to learn more about?
- What did you learn about the Algerian Independence War that you didn't know before?
- What do you think the future will hold for French- Algerian relations? What do you think should happen?



## MATCH UP TASKS

Match up these words to talk about Ramadan in France.

le Coran	Arabic
le jeûne	dawn
arabe	sunset
le premier croissant de Lune	freedom
le coucher du soleil	independence
les cinq piliers de l'Islam	the veil/hijab
l'aube	charity
prier	human rights
la charité	the first crescent moon
le voile	the five pillars of Islam
les droits humains	to pray
la liberté	fasting
l'indépendance	the Quran/Koran

## What other words might you need to know to talk about Islam in French?

Match up these definitions with the phrases above.

1. un vêtement porté par des femmes musulmanes couvrant la tête et parfois aussi le visage
2. les normes protégeant la dignité de tous les êtres humains
3. le texte sacré de l'Islam
4. la langue de l'Islam
5. la privation volontaire de toute nourriture et de toute boisson y compris l'eau
6. le moment où le Soleil descend et disparaît à l'horizon
7. le moment où le ciel commence à s'éclaircir avant le lever du Soleil
8. une position d'autonomie en ce qui concerne un pays
9. la situation d'une personne libre
10. les obligations rituelles de tout musulman
11. s'adresser à Dieu
12. un acte de bienfaisance et de solidarité
13. la phase lunaire qui apparaît quelques jours après la nouvelle Lune

## COMPREHENSION TASK

Read these comments made/found on Instagram about French laïcité and face covering. First highlight the cognates and the words you understand. Can you interpret the poster's point of view?

a

Ce n'est pas mon hijab qui m'opprime, ni même mon père, mon frère ou ce prétendu mari mais bien la société patriarcale occidentale et le gouvernement français!

b

Une femme voilée n'est pas une prisonnière!

c

Je ne juge pas les femmes non voilées car un jour je l'étais.

d

Une femme qui porte le voile, ce n'est pas une femme terroriste, c'est une femme. Il faut que tout le monde le comprenne!

e

Mais c'est la loi! Il faut accepter la loi!

f

Ce n'est pas un homme qui m'a obligée à me couvrir, c'est ma liberté!

g

Le problème, ce n'est pas le port du voile mais le chômage, la pauvreté et la délinquance. Le voile est juste un vêtement.

h

Quelle est la différence entre une femme qui se voile et une femme qui décide de se teindre les cheveux?



## LISTENING TASK

Listen to the song/ poem 'Le sens de la famille' by Grand Corps Malade & Leïla Bekhti and fill in the gaps.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaEmsZYCn24>

**Challenge:** Don't use the word bank below.

J'ai un peu de mal à imaginer la vie sans mes proches  
Quand je dis un peu de \_\_\_\_\_, en fait je l'imagine pas du tout  
Ils sont mes repères, mes bases, mes compliments, mes reproches  
Sans eux je suis pas entière, je les veux pas loin \_\_\_\_\_, partout  
Avec eux on a pas peur du silence, on a rien à se prouver  
Une sorte d'équipe sans remplaçant, sans \_\_\_\_\_  
Dans cette équipe tu ris, tu râles, tu progresses, tu veux rester  
Très loin du star-system, tu \_\_\_\_\_ tard si t'aimes  
Et si jamais je devais tout perdre, si la roue faisait demi-tour  
Je n'aurais besoin que de leur \_\_\_\_\_ pour que la vie reste facile  
Peu importe ce qu'il y a sur la table, ce qui compte c'est qui il y a autour  
Ce que je ressens je veux leur dire, je crois que j'ai le sens de la \_\_\_\_\_

J'ai un peu de mal à \_\_\_\_\_ la vie sans mes proches  
Quand je dis un peu de mal, en fait je l'imagine pas du tout  
\_\_\_\_\_ avec eux que j'avance, de la sérénité plein les poches  
S'ils ne le partagent pas avec moi, aucun bonheur ne vaut le coup  
Et à l'inverse, il n'y a rien qui ne me fasse plus de peine  
Qu'imaginer leur visage au \_\_\_\_\_ où ils ont appris  
Que mes 20 ans seraient cruels, que mon \_\_\_\_\_ s'annonçait terne  
Le drame ça se partage, mais ça n'apaise pas l'esprit  
Ils m'ont transmis tout ce que j'aimerais transmettre à mon \_\_\_\_\_  
C'est grâce à eux si j'suis en paix et que je pars pas en vrille  
Leur \_\_\_\_\_ sans trompette, leur bienveillance sans détour  
Ce que je leur dois je veux leur dire, je crois que j'ai le sens de la famille

### BANQUE DE MOTS

souvent	restes	famille	mal	presence	imaginer
moment	capitaine	tour	c'es	humanité	avenir



## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Ramadan in France

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<https://time.com/6049226/france-hijab-ban/>  
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African Apocalypse French colonialism in Africa – BBC film (89 mins)

British-Nigerian poet and activist Femi Nylander travels to West Africa to discover the modern-day impact of French colonialism.

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Médine

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Melina Irvine** is an MFL teacher in Bristol with six years classroom experience who has spent extended periods abroad living in Spain, France, Costa Rica and Brazil. She completed her undergraduate degree at Queen Mary University of London, then went on to study her PGCE at the University of Bristol where she is currently completing an MSc in Education. She has a keen interest in ideas around student's sense of belonging and where this intersects with mental health and wellbeing, critical thinking, equalities and social justice. She has held pastoral roles in schools and has collaborated with South Bristol Youth as an academic mentor. She is passionate about making languages education inclusive and engaging for all learners and is excited by the potential for change sparked by increased awareness and conversations around race and equality in schools. She is co-chair of the ALL Decolonise Secondary MFL Curriculum Special Interest Group alongside Lisa Panford.