



Reasons Behind High Unemployment Rates of MAGHREBIANS in FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the reasons behind the high unemployment and/or underemployment rates of French Maghrebians, meaning individuals of Moroccan, Tunisian, or Algerian origin residing in France. In effect, the Maghrebian unemployment rate is almost triple that of the national average and the underemployment rate is almost double. These statistics leave a bleak image for the potential of assimilation of the Maghrebian immigration community in this host country. This paper determines that there are three main barriers to the full employment of French Maghrebians (1) lack of educational opportunities, (2) geographical segregation, and (3) discrimination from French natives on the basis of both religion (Islam) and race (North African Arab). This paper concludes by arguing that it is in the French government's best interest to address the various challenges that halt full Maghrebian assimilation for the sake of both the immigrant group and the country's wellbeing.



INTRODUCTION AND LITERARY REVIEW

Employment rates are an important indicator of the wellbeing of an immigrant population. Not only does employment bring in steady income that the immigrants and their families can use for food, housing, healthcare, and education, but it also contributes to the social integration of the immigrants as it allows them to build the network necessary to truly succeed in a country. High unemployment or underemployment rates (being without a job or being underused within a job) can severely impact immigrants and halt their assimilation on a multi-generational level: the poverty, social isolation, absorption into black markets, loss of self-worth, and radicalization that come with lacking employment can make an immigrant group feel excluded from mainstream society.

One group particularly affected by high unemployment rates in France is the Maghrebian population, the largest and most visible immigrant community in the country both in stock and in flows. Studies from 2007 show that compared to a national unemployment rate of 8.7% and underemployment rate of 26.3%, Maghrebians held an unemployment rate of 19.8% and an underemployment rate of 36.5%.¹ In other words, Maghrebians are over twice as likely to be unemployed than their French counterparts,

and in the cases where when they are employed, they are much more prone to being hired to work part-time or for jobs for which they are overqualified. Many researchers have tried to pinpoint the main factor behind the French Maghrebians' difficulty in finding employment, but the reality shows that a variety of factors are at play. The intersection of Maghrebians' lower levels of education, their housing segregation in urban outskirts, and their exposure to racial, cultural, and religious discrimination all have negative effects on Maghrebian employment rates, making Maghrebian immigrants and their children more likely than other groups in France to be unemployed or underemployed.

Many scholars have studied the poor integration of the Maghrebian community into French society. Alba and Silberman in "The Children of Immigrants and Host Society Educational Systems: Mexicans in the United States and North Africans in France" (2009) examine the factors associated with the lower education levels for Maghrebians, which result in strong employment disparities between natives and Maghrebians.² Blanc in "Urban Housing Segregation of North African 'Immigrants' in France" (1991) focuses on the concentration of Maghrebians in low-income dilapidated neighborhoods plagued by unemployment, making it very challenging for them to escape the social reproduction that keeps them in these neighborhoods.³

Moreover, Fellag's "The Muslim Label: How French North Africans Have Become 'Muslims' and not 'Citizens'" (2014) analyses the religious barrier Maghrebians have to face over multiple generations when attempting to integrate into French society, leading to discrimination related to but not limited to job acquisition.⁴

These scholars have made great contributions to the study of assimilation difficulties for Maghrebians in France, all of which negatively influence employment. However, none of these studies takes an intersectional stance by looking simultaneously into the multiple and various facets that limit employment for Maghrebians, as it is evident through the abundance of research done on the issue that many factors compete to explain this situation. Therefore, this paper will argue that a comprehensive approach is needed, as lower rates of education, housing segregation in urban areas, and discrimination based on race, culture, and religion all work together and compound each other to lead to high unemployment and underemployment rates for Maghrebians in France.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Maghrebian immigration to France is not a new phenomenon. After the end of the Second World War, Western European countries opened their borders to migrants to contribute to the

manufacturing economic boom that lasted until the 1970s. Migrants from ex-colonial countries, particularly Moroccans, Tunisians, and Algerians, were top picks for France since they were considered more culturally and linguistically compatible than migrants from other non-European countries. These migrants, mostly young single men, were generally well received by the French population as they were considered to be temporary workers, present in France only to fill low-paying jobs needed to respond to high production demands. European economic prosperity, however, could not last forever: the oil crises of the 1970s ushered an era of higher unemployment rates that disproportionately impacted migrants as most of them worked in the industrial sector. Although the French government started to attempt to push out migrants due to lack of employment, Maghrebians had already started forming ethnic communities in low-class neighborhoods and inviting their families to settle in France. The French government decided to allow the migrants' families to join them in hopes of avoiding male riots, but the French people started to become aware of the social costs of migration, leading to a rise of anti-immigrant sentiments and right-wing parties. Consequentially, as René Giraud predicted with his theory of the threshold of tolerance, "which holds that there [is] a point at which a minority group's population would become high enough



to cross the threshold and increase conflict between ethnic groups,” Maghrebians started to face widespread hostility in France due to their growing influence and visibility in urban areas.⁵

Today, Maghrebian immigrants in France are known to be poorly integrated, even though the French government has no information on how this group is faring. Contrarily to the liberal American model, the French republican assimilationist model refuses to collect data between particular groups, for instance between immigrant versus native groups or Christian versus Muslim groups. In other words, the French government is legally obliged to remain “religiously and ethnically blind” and refuses to recognize “the relevance of ethnic or religious differences, treating citizens instead as part of one monolithic, national ‘French’ community.”⁶ While the intention behind this philosophy is noble and meant to foster a sense of unity among natives and immigrants, it limits the possibility for the French government to identify disenfranchised groups (in this case Maghrebians who are suffering from high unemployment rates) and to assist them in the most efficient way. The French government thus runs the risk of further perpetuating the social inequalities between Maghrebians and other groups, as it has been doing at its own detriment for the past half century. This is illustrated in George Packer’s article “The Other France” (2015) from *The New Yorker*, which paints the

bleak image of the lives of Maghrebians in Paris and how they are stuck in a system that incessantly fights against their success: social isolation, economic disparities, cultural differences, and ideological radicalization experienced by young Maghrebians are creating ever-growing rifts with no clear solution between them and other groups in France.⁷

Although many different factors could contribute to better integrating Maghrebians in France, ensuring that their employment rates are brought up to the levels of natives or other immigrant groups can go a very long way in bridging this assimilation gap. To confront this daunting task entails analyzing the reasons behind the high unemployment rate in the Maghrebian population, most notably lower rates of education, housing segregation in urban areas, and discrimination based on race, culture, and religion, all of which have negative ramifications on employment.

ANALYSIS

EDUCATION

The first important factor that negatively affects employment rates for Maghrebians in France is the lack of educational opportunities compared to those available to the Native French: a study from 2003 reported that while 18% of the Native French had no educational credentials, the number shot up to 30% for

Maghrebians born in France from 1969 to 1978. These numbers have improved compared to those of earlier Maghrebian generations and continue to improve thanks to better linguistic fluency and democratization of the French education system; nonetheless, while children of Maghrebians have higher education rates than their parents, their educational attainment remains much lower than those of the children of natives and very few of them reach post-secondary education.⁸ Lower education rates have adverse consequences for employment since a much smaller portion of the job market is open to those with fewer diplomas and low-paying jobs are more likely to be replaced by mechanization. A study from Indiana University's Kelly School of Business (2010) highlights this correlation between unemployment and education: according to this research, "labor force participation goes up as educational attainment levels increase," "the unemployment rate goes down as educational attainment goes up," and "the unemployment rate [for those] with less than a high school degree was nearly 20 percent, dropping to about 4 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher."⁹

The causes for lower levels of education are multiple. Many blame the French educational system, as they argue that it prevents social upward mobility and keeps Maghrebian youths in positions from where it is much more difficult

to reach higher levels of education. For example, underfunded school programs in immigrant communities are important impediments to success since schools that serve immigrants cannot give their students the same resources as schools that serve natives. Additionally, the hierarchical system within French high schools tends to place children of immigrants into "the lowest tracks" meant for students who do not wish to proceed with secondary education. Higher achieving students, who are disproportionately children of affluent natives, complete the baccalauréat général with a choice between a scientific, economics and social sciences, and literary route. On the other hand, lower achieving students, who are disproportionately children of low-income Maghrebian immigrants, complete the séries technologiques or lycée professionnel designed for those who do not wish to go on with higher education and need to learn professional skills as of high school.¹⁰ The combination of underfunded schools and higher rates of Maghrebian students in "lower tracks" that do not offer a path to higher education are systematic issues that create lower education attainment, and ergo higher unemployment rates, for Maghrebian students.

Moreover, others see the familial situation of Maghrebian students as an impediment to high education rates. Many Maghrebian children come from "single-parent homes and larger



families, which would necessitate reforms in family and educational policies” to better accommodate students from those family backgrounds and ensure their success.¹¹ As Maghrebian parents are much less likely to have received a formal education, it makes it more challenging for their children to perform well in school as they do not possess the same support at home as those who come from better educated families: in effect, “until the late 1970s, about three quarters grew up in families where neither parent had earned any sort of diploma; only 10-12 percent had parents who had both achieved a diploma of some kind. Undoubtedly, many of the Maghrebians had not even attended school for more than a year or two, at most.”¹² Being raised in a bilingual family also comes with its challenges, particularly if the parents have low literacy rates (which many immigrants from the Maghreb have), since French schools do not provide much assistance for students that come from non-French speaking backgrounds.¹³ Coming from difficult family situations, in addition to structural issues within the French education system, thus hurts Maghrebian students and impedes their ability to reach higher levels of education.

SEGREGATION

In addition to lower education rates, the geographical segregation of “undesirable” immigrants, particularly those from West and North Africa, makes it difficult for Maghrebians to

reach regular levels of employment. As of the 1950s, Maghrebian immigrants started to settle in low income neighborhoods right outside of Paris which, over time, “became more permanent settlements and widened the discrepancies in living standards between immigrants and the rest of France.”¹⁴ The French banlieues, or suburbs of a large city, are known for housing immigrant communities in low-income housing projects and for being a hub of strong ethnic networks separate from Native French networks. Maghrebians in Paris, for example, who represent one third of the Parisian population, are disproportionately concentrated “in old housing in formerly industrial and working-class districts of the north and east of the city [...] in large public housing estates planned for reducing the distance between residence and place of work;” it was estimated in 2006 that around 50% of Maghrebian immigrants lived in these banlieues.¹⁵ This has created a strong geographic and cultural separation between Maghrebians and the Native French: according to Packer in his *New Yorker* article about the banlieues, the Native French population only has pejorative associations with the banlieues, such as “decayed housing projects, crime, unemployment, and Muslims,” and most have probably never set foot there in their lives. He also illustrates this bubble very clearly as something Maghrebians feel is an impediment to their true integration in

France:

“The highway that encircles Paris is known as the Périphérique. Entering or leaving the suburbs is often called ‘crossing the Périphérique,’ as if it were a frontier. Banlieue residents joke that going into Paris requires a visa and a vaccination card. Mehdi Meklat, a young writer at Bondy Blog, which reports on the banlieues, told me, ‘There are two parallel worlds.’ He called the dynamic between Paris and the suburbs ‘schizophrenic.’ [...] Compared with American slums, the banlieues have relatively decent standards of housing and safety, but the psychological distance between the 93 and the Champs-Élysées can feel insuperable—much greater than that between the Bronx and Times Square. The apartment blocks in the cités, often arranged around a pharmacy, a convenience store, and a fast-food joint, look inward. Many have no street addresses, obvious points of entry, or places to park. The sense of separation is heightened by the names of the surrounding streets and schools, preserved from a historical France that has little connection to residents’ lives. The roads around Gros Saule—a drug-ridden cité where the police dare not enter—include Rue Henri Matisse and Rue Claude Debussy.”¹⁶

Being stuck in the banlieues negatively affects access to employment. Physical exclusion from the hubs of education and of the high-skilled jobs market makes admissions to top universities and access to desirable jobs elusive, especially since public transportation from the banlieues to the city is limited. Education and

employment opportunities are sparse in the banlieues, and social reproduction over multiple generations denies children of Maghrebians the chance to break out of the low-skilled immigrant bubble or to find employment that is suitable for their skills: as a result, many Maghrebians “have to settle for unskilled labor jobs in higher crime neighborhoods, which perpetuates their living in the suburbs and continued economic and social marginalization.”¹⁷ Fighting engrained social reproduction without governmental interference is almost impossible, and the French government with its philosophy of republicanism and assimilationism is unlikely to implement geographical integration policies based on race. While recently there have been some initiatives to reduce the gap between the banlieues and Paris, such as Sarkozy’s Grand Paris Project of 2007 to facilitate transportation from the banlieues to Paris and set up a structure that allows for greater cooperation between the two, the divide between the banlieues and Paris persists, limiting employment opportunities for young Maghrebians.¹⁸

DISCRIMINATION

To say that all Maghrebians have low levels of education and live in the banlieues is a big overgeneralization: while it is true that a disproportionate number are affected by these two factors, some have been able to break from poverty and gain higher levels of education, hence





accessing the middle class. Although economic prosperity facilitates legitimate job acquisition, Maghrebians in France still face severe discrimination that negatively affects multiple facets of their lives, including their access to employment. Algerians and Moroccans, second only to Haitians, are the groups who feel the most discriminated against in France, which is probably due to their “visible and culturally distant” nature.¹⁹ The numbers pertaining to discrimination are especially divergent when comparing Native French discrimination rates with Maghrebian and Sub-Saharan African discrimination rates: “While only 8 percent of the Native French

claim to have had personal experiences with labor-market discrimination and most of them say it happened just once, about 40 percent of the Maghrebian and the other African-origin men make this claim and the great majority of them perceive it as having happened multiple times.”²⁰

More specifically, the way discrimination against Maghrebians influences employment has been made clear by “discrimination testing” studies which have proven that employers are less likely to hire someone with a Maghrebian name. In a survey conducted by the Discrimination Observatory (2004-2006) with 258 resumes sent out for applicants with both French

and Maghrebian names, “The applicants with ‘French’ names [...] received more than five times as many positive responses as those with ‘North African’ names.”²¹ A second study found that “all other things being equal, a Muslim candidate is 2.5 times less likely to obtain a job interview than is his or her Christian counterpart.”²² In other words, even though a child of Maghrebians and a child of Native French citizens can have the same qualifications, the job will likely go to the Native French child due to the employer’s bias, either conscious or subconscious. Since the large majority of those in high-skilled positions are Native French and not from Maghrebian origin, it is very difficult to avoid perpetuating the potential discrimination that hurts Maghrebians’ chances of acquiring employment. This competition between French and Maghrebians increases with a more aggressive job market, with more educated qualified individuals than jobs, which makes ethnic origin “important to the attainment of stable employment (rather than a precarious or short-term job or unemployment) and of the more desirable positions (linked to better remuneration and long-term prospects).”²³

Much of the discrimination stems from the persistence of the of the Muslim identity over the French identity of Maghrebians, something that has carried on despite multiple generations of Maghrebians being born in France. The Muslim identity of Maghrebians is what stands out

among all their other identifiers, and it is perceived by many French Natives to be directly at odds with the “Christian foundation on which Europe has been built” as well as a threat to the “increasingly secular nature of European society.”²⁴ The still visible nature of the Maghrebian community has upset many among the Native French, who believe that Maghrebians want to maintain their identity and consciously seek to distance themselves from French society. In addition, a heightened sense of Islamophobia in France following the Islamist terror attacks in the past few years, particularly the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo offices and the November 2015 Paris attacks which killed 130 people, has further marginalized Maghrebians from mainstream French society despite being in France for over half a century. As a result, many young Maghrebians go through very strong identity crises between their two seemingly incompatible identities. This is especially problematic in the republican France, a country that considers all its citizens to be French above anything else; while France claims to be religiously and ethnically blind, religious and ethnic background continues to play a very important role in job acquisition, as having a less favorable religion or ethnicity can lead to much fewer employment options.

CONCLUSION

Maghrebians in France have suffered from high unemployment and underemployment rates in the past few decades, starting with the oil crisis of the 1970s, the resulting decline of the manufacturing sector, and rise of anti-immigrant sentiments. Since then, lack of employment has always affected immigrant groups, especially Maghrebians, at a higher rate than the Native French. Although many scholars have tried to pinpoint a single reason explaining these particularly high unemployment rates, it is clear that Maghrebian unemployment is due to the intersection of a variety of factors that heighten barriers to employment. Most notably, lower levels of education make it harder to attain employment, geographical segregation reinforces the exclusion of Maghrebians in low-income high-unemployment areas, and racial, cultural, or religious discrimination results in lower hiring rates for Maghrebians. While these are the main factors contributing to unemployment and underemployment of Maghrebians in France, additional factors may also come into play, with further research needed to study their implications.

It is in the French government's best interest to address the high Maghrebian unemployment rates, even though it is a challenge to do so without census information based on religion or race. The 2005 protests in the Pari-

sian suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois are a perfect example of the dangers of ignoring the systematic disadvantages faced by a group that is left behind. While these protests were triggered by the death of two teenagers at the hands of police brutality, underlying factors such as low rates of employment, economic disenfranchisement, and discrimination caused by xenophobia had been brewing anger among this population and drew them to violent protests.²⁵ Had the Maghrebian population experienced better integration and higher employment rates, the chances of revolting against the French system they claim works against them would have been low as they would have felt to be truly part of the system. For France to be the true cohesive and inclusive republic it claims to be, the French government should take specific action to ensure the successful integration of the Maghrebian population by fighting against the factors, notably substandard education, segregation, and discrimination, that limit their access to employment.

ENDNOTES

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