

Counting France's Numbers – Deflating the Numbers Inflation

In France, fear of stigmatizing some ethnic groups has hindered the ability to analyze the country's foreign-origin population by disallowing some key questions from being asked on the Census form. Consequently, the size of the Muslim population in France has long been a subject of wild speculation. The figure of five to six million Muslims has been used by government officials, but one often hears much higher estimates.

Now, for the first time, a large-scale research project known as the "Family History Study" (involving 380,000 persons over age 18) has collected information on the birthplace of *parents* and on childhood language practices. This makes it possible to estimate the foreign-origin population over three generations, and to derive the component *likely* to be Muslim.

There are some 14 million persons of foreign-origin in France: 4.3 million immigrants, 5.5 million children of immigrants, and 4 million grandchildren. Together, they constitute 24% of the population in metropolitan France.

It is Southern Europe -- Italy, Spain, and Portugal -- that contributes the largest segment to the foreign-origin population, 5.2 million people.

In the last few years, political debate in France has reduced the foreign-origin population to its North African component. Actually, that segment

represents only 22% of the total foreign-origin population -- 3 million people. A far cry from the six million reported in *Le Monde* (5 April 2003)!

The total population *presumed* to be Muslim is 3.7 million. Of these, 1.7 million are immigrants, 1.7 million are children of immigrants, and fewer than 300,000 are grandchildren. 82% of all foreign-origin Muslims are from North Africa -- Algeria (43%), Morocco (28%), and Tunisia (11%). The others are mostly from Black Africa (340,000) and Turkey (300,000).

Actually, that number is somewhat high. In a country in which people are free to choose their religion, many forego religious practice. This is confirmed in a 1992 study on "Geographic Mobility and Social Integration" in which 30% of young people of Algerian parentage (aged 20 -29) declared themselves religiously unaffiliated.

Among adults, half of those *presumed* to be Muslims still hold foreign nationality. As for voters, a subject that worries politicians on all sides, those who are both French citizens and of voting age numbered just 1.2 million in 1999. In view of its youthful profile, this potential electorate is bound to grow rapidly in coming years.

The Muslim issue is largely a North African one -- now and for a long time to come. Islam is still an imported phenomenon.