



The Islamist Factory

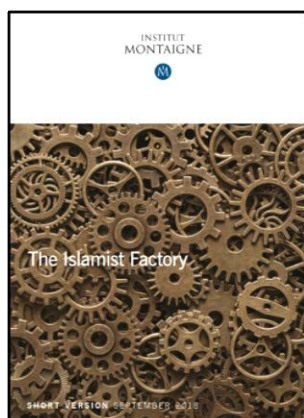
Press release

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“The Islamist ideology frightens. Yet it is not fear that must guide us, it is reason. It is by understanding the gears of the Islamist machine that we will be able to provide an answer to the challenge we are facing.”

Hakim El Karoui, Senior Fellow at Institut Montaigne and author of the report



Paris, 10 September 2018 – After a first report in 2016 on [French Islam](#) and a second in 2017 on [France’s Arab policy](#), Institut Montaigne is now publishing a third report that focuses on Islamism. Islamism is not Islam. It is a contemporary political ideology that overcomes religious belief and personal spirituality. It is a true interpretation of the world, a vision of the organization of society which gives a role to religion in the exercise of power. Its objective is clear: to create a global project with religion as a way of life for the individual and society.

This report – led by by Hakim El Karoui, Senior Fellow at Institut Montaigne, consultant and essayist – aims to show the global nature of the Islamist phenomenon. Its genealogy: the contexts in which it has emerged, the philosophical questions it raises, the vision of the world it carries. Its production: the places where it is manufactured and the administrative machines that produce it; its spread: the men and women who convey it, the political and social networks that disseminate it. Its reception: the way in which it has developed in Europe.

“All around the world, Islamism has built a religious hold on Islam. It is now urgent to act. Muslims have to react first,” notes Hakim El Karoui, Senior Fellow at Institut Montaigne and author of this report.

Our methodology:

- **More than 200 academic books and scholarly reports**, in English, Arabic, French and German were consulted.
- Some **60 interviews** were conducted with institutions, associations, religious leaders, prisons and citizens in eight Arab and European countries.
- A pioneering analysis of **Saudi Leaks** (a set of more than **122,000 Saudi Foreign Ministry documents** uncovered by WikiLeaks in June 2015) was carried out.
- **275 fatwas** (Islamic legal statements issued by an expert on religious law) were analyzed.
- In partnership with Bloom Digital Partners, a thorough analysis was carried out of **data collected on Twitter and Facebook** on the origin and frequency of Islamist content on social media.
















1. Social media: an unparalleled sounding board for Islamist preaching

For eight months, together with Bloom Digital Partners and its artificial-intelligence-based social media tool, we analyzed the discourse around Islam transmitted over the Internet and more particularly on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. This analysis enabled us to assess the incredible audience gathered by the major Islamist accounts, both internationally and nationally.

- **On the Internet, Islamists monopolize the discourse on all issues pertaining to Muslim faith:** worldwide, among the 200 accounts with the most followers on Twitter, 16 can be linked to ideological influencers (such as the President of the United States, the Indian Prime Minister or Bill Gates). Among them are **five preachers, four Saudis and a Kuwaiti**. Two of them rank higher than the Dalai-Lama and the Pope (taking solely his English account), with more than 20 million followers. Unlike the 11 other accounts in this classification, they are unknown to the Western public at large. And the active communities around these accounts are significant: some sympathizers interact daily with their content as regularly as they would do with accounts of political figures.

TOP 16 Ideologues on Twitter

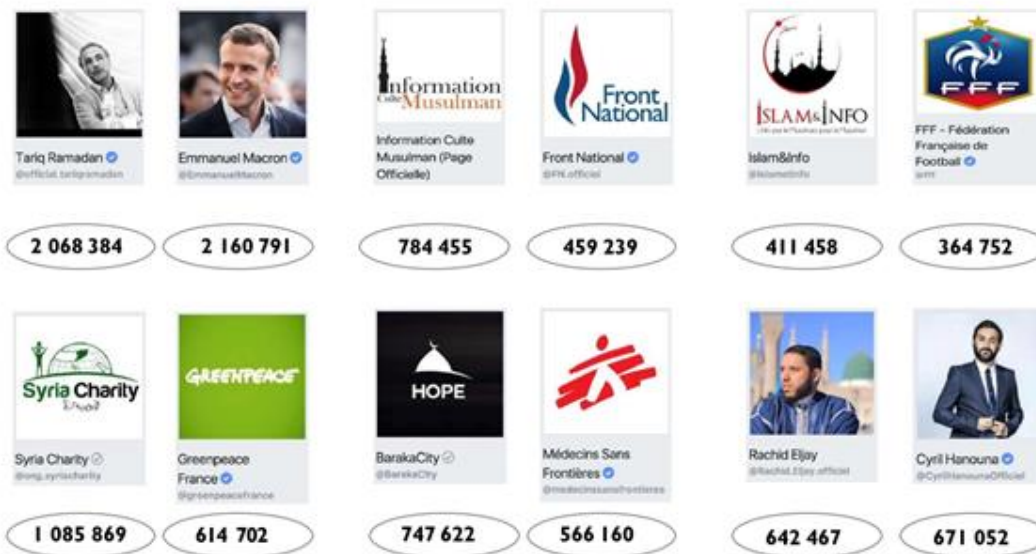
TOP 16 des idéologues présents sur Twitter

3	 Barack Obama @BarackObama	102,414,977	109	 أحمد الشقيري @shugari	18,090,744
19	 Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump	51,719,574	114	 Pope Francis @Pontifex	17,725,320
21	 Bill Gates @BillGates	46,021,026	126	 Papa Francisco @Pontifex_es	16,675,952
25	 Narendra Modi @narendramodi	42,435,003	138	 Paulo Coelho @paulocoelho	15,615,267
66	 PMO India @PMOIndia	26,199,895	151	 President Obama @POTUS44	15,110,428
78	 President Trump @POTUS	23,087,621	88	 د. محمد العريفي @MohamadAlarefe	21,617,377
			100	 د. عائش القرني @Dr_alqarnee	19,210,478
104	 Dalai Lama @DalaiLama	18,623,200	162	 سلمان العودة @salman_alodah	14,483,527
			166	 مشاري راشد العفاسي @Alafasy	14,124,841

- **Islamists also monopolize French-speaking social media:** Islamist discourse is at the heart of Islamic content on French-speaking pages. Facebook, with 32 million users a month, remains the main French-speaking digital channel. In order to analyze Islamism's impact on this network, 253 public pages related to Islam were selected via manual search, enhanced by the social media's algorithmic recommendations. 47 of them can be considered significant pages, as in May 2018, their audience exceeded 100,000 followers.
- **Scrutinizing these accounts, we quickly noticed a clear distribution of the roles between the Salafists and the figures close to the Muslim Brotherhood: while Salafists are spreading religious and theological messages, people around the Brotherhood are discussing the entry of religion in the public sphere: they are doing politics.**

Comparison of Facebook Fans

Comparaison de fans Facebook



* 27 April 2018

- The imam of Brest, Rachid Eljay (642,467 followers), who could be described as a Muslim televangelist, is almost at the same level in terms of potential audience as Cyril Hanouna, the host of the French TV show *“Touche Pas à Mon Poste”*, broadcasted on C8. His progress is significant: in the summer of 2016, Rachid Eljay had close to 400,000 followers, a number that grew to more than 520,000 the following year. In early 2018, after securing a diploma in secularism and turning around his image and discourse (he does not refer to it as Salafist anymore), he continued to accumulate new followers and reached 610,000 subscribers. Last spring, 640,000 people were following his page.

In the volunteer sector, two of the most important NGOs on Facebook, Greenpeace and Doctors Without Borders (whose French-speaking pages have 614,702 followers and 566,160 followers respectively) have been overtaken by the top two Islamic charity associations: Syria Charity and BarakaCity (1,085,869 and 747,622).

- **Moderate Muslim influencers are suffering:** the situation is unequivocal: the impact and audience of moderate Muslims is very small. Indeed, the first Facebook account clearly representing a progressive approach is that of Mohamed Bajrafil. In our sample of the 253 most important Muslim pages on Facebook, he is only ranked 112th, with 30,000 followers.

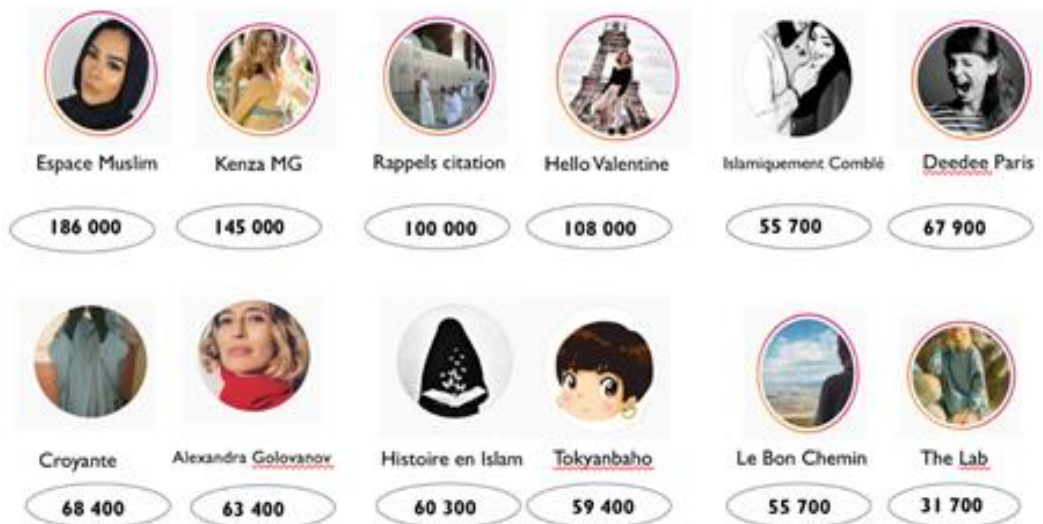
Comparison of Twitter followers between moderates and hardliners or carriers of a political message

Comparaison de followers Twitter entre modérés et rigoristes ou porteurs d'un message politique



- **Telegram, the hard core:** even though encrypted networks such as Telegram are more known by Jihadist circles, many Salafist preachers have also chosen to use these applications. **At least 6,000 people are present on Salafist channels on Telegram.**
- **Instagram, to influence Muslim women:** the social media network bought out in 2012 by Facebook is mainly used by a female audience: 62% of Instagram users are women and the network is widely used by the fashion industry. Predominantly anonymous pages dedicated to “Islamic fashion” were thus developed by combining hardline religious content, the promotion of modern Islamic fashion, beauty tips and recipes. **At least 186,000 people are following Muslim religious accounts using Salafist references.**

The principal influencers on Instagram



- **Our study also reveals – via the study of emojis – that 84% of the reaction of Salafist content’s followers is positive and 8% is very positive.** This data clearly confirms the trend observed in Muslim bookstores, where Saudi Arabian Ulema are introduced as the undisputed source on the practice of Islam, which leaves almost no room for preachers proposing an alternative discourse, whether internationally or nationally.

- **The filtering of key words related to the Salafist discourse enabled us to identify six overriding themes on the Internet:**
 1. Salafist dress code: this involves conversations around the full veil but also the long robe worn by Salafist men (key words: *aqmis, sitar, niqab* and *Jilbeb*)
 2. Islamic migration: *hijra*
 3. Aggressive retrenchment: this category refers to “non-believers,” people who do not adhere to the Muslim faith (key words: *kuffar, mourtad, taghout, skirk*)
 4. Chosen group (key words: *salaf wa salif, salaf, minhaj salafi*)
 5. Major principles (key words: *tawhid* and *aqida*)
 6. Blameworthy religious innovation (*Bid’a*)

These themes reveal the essence of the Salafist discourse: all the norms relying on the daily life and on big theological theories. An orthopraxis is an orthodoxy.

The theme that generates the most publications is the one linked to strict dress codes: there are 37,318 references (on French-speaking pages). The latter have generated 62,689 social-media engagements from 45,513 accounts, which we can qualify as belonging to sympathizers. **The semantics of rejection is in second place, with 29,477 publications and 50,252 engagements.** The term *kuffar* has the most interactions, i.e. 35,096.

- Analyses of social media also suggest that **the spread of digital Salafism in France follows a particularly rigorous organization.** A hierarchy of players is defined. Students having studied at the University of Madinah enjoy significant recognition, especially when they were acquainted with great *Ulema*. They are often the ones spreading religious content to accounts in French – these Francophone (or Anglophone) accounts then redirect the user to large-scale Salafist profiles.

Our study on the Internet thus indicates that Islamism, whether political or purely theological, massively uses the Internet and social media to spread its ideology and mobilize its sympathizers.

Social media are particularly important in the Islamist dissemination process knowing that the French faithful often use the internet to learn more about their religion. As highlighted in Institut Montaigne’s former report, “A French Islam Is Possible”: To the question “*When you look for information on Islam, do you seek information...?*” 73% of the 2016 sample responded first “on the internet” or “on Google,” versus only 47% for “with an imam.” It is important to note that only a minority of French Muslims can be qualified as Islamists. One million of them follow the Salafist religious discourse on social media.

3. People, organizations, media: How Islamism spreads

Islamism is a globalized ideology. Starting in the 1960s, it spread beyond the Arab world where it was born to develop in the rest of the Muslim world, and subsequently to all territories where Muslims were present, including in the West. Several channels formed the basis of its expansion.

State-sponsored Salafism. Saudi Arabia has been officially exporting its religious doctrine – Wahhabism – since the 1960s when it was a means to fight against Nasser’s pan-Arabism and against communism. It does so through theoretically autonomous institutions, which actually operate at the heart of the Saudi state structures (the Muslim World League, the Islamic University of Madinah, the World Assembly of

Muslim Youth, the International Islamic Relief Organization or IIRO, the Organization of the Islamic Conference).

Thus, Saudi Arabia's expansionist fervor, backed by important (but complicated to chart back) funding, emerged when the political leader, Ibn Saud and a religious leader, Mohamed Abd El Wahhab agreed on the pact which founded Saudi Arabia. Wahhabism became a soft power and a diplomatic lever that enables Saudi Arabia to have influence on the international scene and primarily in the Middle East. It operates today in different parts of the world, as illustrated by the Saudi Leaks analysis, which reveals the country's strategy on a global scale.

"Saudi Arabia has created a state-sponsored Salafism which it exports to Muslim countries with two main targets: Western and Eastern Africa and Southeast Asia (Pakistan and Indonesia). Europe and France in particular have never been targeted by Saudi Arabian religious expansionism."
Hakim El Karoui

Saudi Leaks is a set of 122,619 Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents uncovered by WikiLeaks in June 2015. The database includes secret documents, correspondence between the Saudi government and its ambassadors abroad, strategic documents, as well as correspondence with organizations such as the MWL (Muslim World League).

We analyzed 15,000 of these documents and we present more than 200 of them in this report, revealing Saudi Arabia's strategy to exercise global influence.

The European Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood's ultimate goal is simple. According to them, "the Qur'an is the solution." The individual, the society, the State, all have to be Islamized.

From the 1980s onwards, they took on the problems of Europe's Muslim communities, such as identity, education and Islamophobia. They then mobilized the Muslim community and formed networks, associations and general - or sector-specific - federations at different levels to represent this community within municipalities, European states or the European Union. The European Muslim Brotherhood draws on an identity-based discourse and proposes a form of Muslim citizenship.

In France, the *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF) [Union of Islamic Organizations of France] has gradually emerged as a major player around two central themes: the fight against Islamophobia and Palestine. In the United Kingdom, the main organization linked to the Muslim Brotherhood is the Muslim Association of Britain. Its objectives are similar and it relies on Islamic charity organizations. In Germany, the *Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland* is less powerful than its French and British counterparts, the German Muslim community being predominantly Turkish. At the European level, the Muslim Brotherhood has not succeeded in creating major organizations: the federations of transnational associations never managed to get established. The organizations which are established are national and yet do not work very well as their direction has never been renewed. They are still run by their founders. What is working today is grass-roots activism, at the local level.

But, the Muslim Brothers have been caught off guard by the rise of Salafism, which has benefited from European Muslim youth's strong religious needs – a lot linked to identity questions – and from young people's attraction for this simplified version of Islam.

The Turkish Diaspora's Supervision Through Religion. Since the 1980s when Turkish powers started to progressively highlight the Muslim values, in Europe, the objective of Turkish religious organizations has been to maintain the links between the diaspora (approximately 5 million people in Europe, including close to 3 million in Germany) and Turkey. This supervision is ensured by the Foreign Affairs department of the Diyanet (DITIB), - an institution representing official Islam – which exercises a tight control over the imams it sends to Europe, and the Millî Görüş network – a political movement, close to the Muslim

Brotherhood and sometimes in competition with Diyanet's institutional Islam – with a tightly knit network of mosques and associations in European countries.

Salafist preaching in Europe. Salafism, though not predominant, is the most dynamic Islamic movement in Europe. This is primarily a quietist Salafism (focused on the religious discourse and the faithful's behavior) rather than a political or Jihadist one. It has gradually established itself as the reference from which every Muslim must today judge his religious practice.

Its dissemination is not the result of one state alone. It is the result of an accumulation of spontaneous initiatives that certainly emanate from what the Saudis created, but that no longer belong to them, so decisively has this movement broken away. There is currently no large-scale Salafist organization capable of uniting the movement.

“Individual Salafism arrived in France with the Algerian ISF and GIA political refugees coming to France in the early 1990s. Today, it relies on French actors, often born in France. The link with Saudi Arabia is not built on organizations nor on funding but on the (often Saudi Arabian) religious references used by the Salafists.

The Media. Saudi television stations, particularly those developed in the Maghreb, have contributed to the theological and religious impregnation of French Muslim populations of North-African origin. Through their family and friends, these populations have been gradually exposed to this particularly strict interpretation of Islam. While television has had a predominant role in the dissemination of Islamist ideologies, books were the first media through which Islamism was disseminated. That has been the case since the 1940s in the Arab world in Europe and in the world, it is still an essential medium.

Salafism's example shows the importance of media in spreading the ideology:

- Today, books play a major role in the spread of Salafism, because their availability free of charge and their simplicity make them easily accessible;
- Cassette tapes were distributed in the Maghreb and Western Europe to spread the Islamist message throughout the 1980s and 1990s;
- Satellite television channels occupy an important place. Al Jazeera was able to offer an unprecedented level of political debate in the Arab world, coupled with the construction of a propaganda system intended to promote the Muslim Brotherhood and its religious leader, Youssef al-Qaradâwî. Saudi religious television channels (Iqraa and Islah), born after Al Jazeera to challenge it, have also contributed to the spread of Salafism around the Muslims of the world.
- Today, the internet and social media have taken over with impressive force.

4. At the heart of Islamism's production centers

Born from the clash with the West and during a postcolonial era seeking for answers to Colonization, Islamism gradually gained autonomy to the point where today it is a discourse that is independent of the West, and a narrative and set of myths that are coherent at their core. The way in which this great narrative established itself is the focus of our research. The emergence of Islamist ideology is the result of an evolution, the process of which is rarely explained in the Western discourse. It is essential for us to track the genesis of Islamism and to understand its mutations in an effort to understand how it was constructed and the historical events that triggered its development.

“We must stop trying to understand Islamism using the West as a vantage point; it is not a byproduct of the West. Islamism is much more than a response to colonialism, to the Iraq war, to Israel or the socio-economic misery and discriminations in European suburbs. Islamism is part of a great contemporary

ideology. Like Western, Chinese or Indian ideology, it addresses more than a billion people. It is a project in itself that exists today, irrespective of the West.” Hakim El Karoui

At the heart of the Islamists' vision of the world is the idea of Western decadence from which Muslims must protect themselves.

Different currents of Islamism coexist. Before being disseminated in the rest of the world, Islamist ideologies were born and developed in particular countries and contexts, and transformed the societies where they evolved. Today, the three centers of Islamism are Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood. Iran has largely abandoned its project of spreading its Islamist revolution because of a lack of means.

Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia. This consists of the implementation of quietist Salafism - an interpretation of Islam which glorifies the "pious ancestors", the Prophet, his companions and in particular the first four caliphs - at a state level. More than a religion, it embodies an inescapable alliance between politics and religion. It is at once an Islamic way of thinking, a system of government and an omnipresent social framework. The strength of Wahhabism and the Saudi dynasty is the consequence of several factors: significant economic power thanks to oil, remarkable political stability backed by the *Ulema* (the theologians), and the prestige of having to manage Islam's Holy sites, a genuine religious soft power.

“But the Saudis are in the process of being overtaken by the creature they have created. At no time, in particular, does Wahhabism advocate rebellion against the State and more generally against the established order. However, this is what happened not only in the United States and Europe but also in Arabia (1979, 1989, 2005...)” Hakim El Karoui

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and later in the Arab world. The Society of the Muslim Brothers was created in 1928 in Egypt by Hassan al-Banna and rapidly became a key player in the Egyptian political life. Its initial goal is simple: to promote a return to real Islam within society. The Brotherhood is social before being political; it develops a major network of grassroots associations, thereby promoting a “bottom-up Islamization.” The organization of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology has subsidiaries in almost all Arab-Muslim countries, which become major players on the political scene from the 1980s (creation of the Hamas, the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia, the MTI in Tunisia, political party in Yemen and Kuwait, etc.) The Arab springs have allowed them to come to power, particularly in Turkey, in Tunisia and in Egypt. They have nevertheless failed, faced with the reality of running a country and the hostility of a significant part of the Tunisian and Egyptian populations. Besides, they are increasingly questioned and competed with in the Arab world.

Turkish Islamism. Initiated in the 1980s, the use of the Muslim religion for political purposes by the Turkish political authorities has accelerated since 2002, and the arrival in power of a party based on political Islam, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan: the AKP. Its ideology is conservative and based on religion. Yet religion is government by politics in Turkey; the clergy being at the service of government policy. In Turkey, Islamism has adopted a strong nationalist character – which distinguishes it from the Muslim Brotherhood – to evolve into Turkish-Islamism. *“Recep Tayyip Erdogan has turned religion into a political instrument: religion was silenced by Atatürk. He decided to turn religion into a weapon at the service of his nationalist project. He has implemented a very centralized and efficient organization,”* explains Hakim El Karoui.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran. Iran is overwhelmingly Shia and is presented as Saudi Arabia's main competing Muslim model in the region. All the machinery of the state is under the direct or indirect control of the Iranian clerical power. Iran is the only Muslim theocracy today. But Iran's ideological expansion was limited by the outbreak of the war with Iraq in 1980, shortly after the mullahs took power in Tehran. Today, Iran targets its religious propaganda mainly on countries with Shiites (Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain) and Syria and Yemen (Alawites and Houthis belong to a branch of Shiism different from Iranian Duodecimal Shiism).

Finally, it is essential to recall that Islamism only became popular in the 1980s thanks to the beginning of the great movement for the modernization of Arab societies that began at that time with the decline in women's fertility and their progressive but massive access to higher education.

In a way, Islamism is the response of (some) men to the emancipation of women.

5. What are the solutions?

"The only answer is the fight against ignorance: it is after all the fight of the Enlightenment! So let us not abandon this requirement of knowledge. It is the ignorance of Islam by some Muslims and the ignorance of Islam by non-Muslims that benefits Islamists who succeed in making them believe that they are Islam,"
Hakim El Karoui

The rise of Islamism is first and foremost the issue of Muslims. Why? Because they are the first concerned in the sense that they are the first targeted by the promoters of this ideology. Second, and particularly in a secular state like France, because they are the only legitimate ones to answer.

To build an effective response, we need, as the Islamists did, people, organizations and the media. Which men and which women? The French Muslims, often silent, integrated, who live their faith without suspecting the state of wanting to undermine it. They are concerned about the anti-Muslim xenophobia that is progressing and being incarnated politically in the various populisms that are shaking Europe. In this context, can they stay away from the response to the polycentric, reticular and decentralized Islamist machine that is operating at full capacity? Probably not.

To mobilize them, organizations and funding are needed. There is a lot of money circulating in France today in connection with Islam: donations, pilgrimages and the *halal* market constitute an important but poorly organized and absolutely unregulated Islamic economy.

An organization made up of independent personalities (from countries of origin as well as Muslim economic activities) is necessary to provide concrete services aimed at improving the situation (transparency, traceability of donations, quality of service of travel agencies organizing the pilgrimage...), to collect small sums from each act of Islamic consumption and to reinvest this money in the general interest of Muslims... and France.

The media and especially social networks are essential: can we allow Salafists to establish a religious monopoly on the internet without acting upon it? The relationship with Arabia is essential. This is the paradox of the situation: Saudi propaganda is at the origin of the development of Salafism. But Salafism will not be effectively fought without Saudi Arabia. The arrival of Mohammad bin Salman, the Crown Prince, can be seen as an opportunity (even if one must remain cautious and judge on the facts and not only on words and intentions) because he needs a modernization of religious discourse to modernize society. This observation is in no way a blank cheque given to Saudi Arabia in the conduct of a number of subjects (war in Yemen, blockade of Qatar, attitudes towards human rights activists in Arabia, etc.).

The French State has a major but paradoxical role: it cannot act directly because of its requirement for neutrality. On the other hand, it can support developments because it is an essential stakeholder. It must also ensure public order and respect for the law, which stipulates that it guarantees freedom of conscience, i.e. the freedom to believe and not to believe. Finally, it has a major diplomatic role, in the dialogue with Turkey and Arabia in particular, but also with Morocco and Algeria, these four States interfering in one way or another in the Islam of France. Within the State, the National Education system: training managers and teachers in secularism. Teach them to interpret manifestations of religious extremism as well. Understanding what is admissible in the name of freedom of belief and what is not because it violates that same freedom of belief (which is also the freedom not to believe) is crucial. Reviving Arabic language learning is major as Arabic classes in mosques have become the best way for Islamists to attract young people to their mosques and schools.

Finally, the question of the rise of Islamism at European level must be addressed. This subject deserves the mobilization of the institutions, in particular the European External Action Service (EEAS), to change their approach and to work on sharing the lessons and good practices from each member. The European Union must take a closer look at the Islamist fact and not just focus on sharing intelligence and coordinating the terrorist threat in its member countries. It is also at the European level that diplomatic and theological work involving religious leaders, Islamologists and theologians must be initiated to allow the emergence of a debate on conflicting theological issues. It is at European level that work can be undertaken to train religious leaders. Europe must take up the question of Islam, without passion or hatred but with rigor and reason: it is the interest of Europe's Muslims who must escape the grip of the countries of origin and the Islamic grip, it is also Europe's interest, given that the question of Islam and the fear that this religion arouses have become common and central in the continental political debate.

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Founded in 2000 and based in Paris, Institut Montaigne is an independent think tank dedicated to public policy in France and Europe. Its work is the result of a rigorous, critical and open method of analysis based on international comparisons. This pioneering non-profit think tank brings together business leaders, senior civil servants, academics, civil society and personalities from a wide range of backgrounds. It is run exclusively through private contributions, each representing less than 1,5% of its annual budget, which amounts to € 4.5 million. Through its various actions - proposals, evaluations of public policies, citizen participations and experimentations - Institut Montaigne aims to fully play a key role in the democratic debate.