

Private school permitting students to wear Islamic clothing closed in Paris

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The Meo High School (MHS) in Paris's 19th district announced its closure following an order on December 7 from the Parisian police prefect. The school gives instruction to 110 children aged 11-18 years old, many of whom are from a Muslim background. The school's closure is only the latest provocation in a series of attacks launched by the Macron government against institutions that serve France's six million Muslims.

A statement published on Twitter by the school's staff described the "disproportionate and manifestly arbitrary response" that was not "taking into account the welfare of the children in this unprecedented situation." The staff statement reiterated the school's commitment to "universalist values and excellence in education" and asked for "responsible support, solidarity, and peace in the face of this injustice."

The closure of MHS takes place as the vast majority of French children and teachers are forced to remain in school under the criminal "herd immunity" policy of the Macron government. The announcement exposes the government's claim that the deadly drive to reopen schools is aimed at protecting children's education and welfare, rather than permitting the continued extraction of profit from working parents. The shutdown of MHS will leave 110 students out of school half-way through an already thoroughly disrupted semester.

MHS is in a predominantly immigrant district in north-eastern Paris and provides education to a high proportion of Muslim students. The private school is secular and teaches the national syllabus. Its website describes its "conception of education for all without any prejudices and with the acceptance of the personal freedom of conscience of each individual."

The closure of MHS is part of a wave of mosque and Muslim charity closures ordered by the Macron government. The message of the French state is clear;

any institution that refuses to conform to its attacks on freedom of expression will be targeted. Many families have undoubtedly sent their children to MHS and other similar private schools to avoid draconian laws passed by successive administrations outlawing religious clothing at public schools.

Religious symbols were banned in schools in 2004, by a law that was aimed at whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment and was targeted at the veil. In 2010, full-face veils like the burqa were banned in all public places in France.

MHS was closed through byzantine administrative methods. The authorities ordered the shutdown on the pretext of the school's utilization of an unsafe building. The school explained in its English-language statement that "this building is shared with other institutions also working with kids that were not asked to shut down." The statement reports that the school has enacted "massive work" to ensure security requirements have been met in recent months.

The closure order followed an inter-ministerial inspection on November 17, when the school was stormed by 40 inspectors, ministerial agents, and police officers. The unnecessary presence of police in what was officially a safety inspection, seems to have been an effort to intimidate students and staff at the school.

Macron's cynical efforts to posture as the defender of French teachers in the aftermath of the murder of Samuel Paty have been further exposed by the closure. In the context of a worsening economic crisis, the closure has left eighteen teachers without jobs. This follows his use of the police to violently suppress lycée students and teachers striking against dangerous health conditions in schools.

MHS's shutdown came just two days before the anti-separatism bill (recently renamed the bill confirming

republican principles) was presented to the council of ministers on December 9. In an interview with *Le Monde* published on the same day, Prime Minister Jean Castex stated, “[Muslim separatism] is not there in the text [of the law]. But the enemy of the Republic is an ideology called radical Islamism, which aims to divide the French people.”

Castex went to absurdly insist that “we [the French government] will never equate radical Islamism with Muslims.” In fact, the government has been engaged in an increasingly open campaign targeting Muslims. Last week, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin announced that 76 mosques around the country will be targeted for inspection and closure. Already before his announcement, there had been more than 70 mosques closed since the beginning of the year.

In the wake of the terrorist killing of high-school teacher Samuel Paty on October 15, this campaign has been intensified. Following the attack, Darmanin declared in a television interview that he was personally “shocked” when he saw supermarket aisles with international—i.e., kosher and halal—foods, and making clear that the mere presence of such food aisles led inexorably toward “separatism” that the government is combatting.

Another 52 cultural and other associations were closed down, including the Collective Against Islamophobia in France (CCIF), one of the largest Muslim charities in the country, which primarily offers legal aid to Muslims in discrimination cases.

Speaking at the beginning of this month to *Le Figaro*, Darmanin stated that “up until now, the government has been interested in radicalization and terrorism. Now, we will also attack the terrain of terrorism, where can be found those people who create the intellectual and cultural space to secede and impose their values.” His definition, of those who “create the intellectual and cultural space to secede,” could be used to encompass Muslim cultural associations across the country.

Private education institutions such as MHS are a main target of the anti-“separatism” law. The law will make it easier for the government to dissolve such institutions by executive decree—as well as vastly expanding the state’s power to dissolve a broad array of political and cultural associations. Pointing to the government’s wider preparation for anti-democratic attacks on the entire population, Castex stated in his interview with *Le*

Monde that although the current target is “Islamism,” in the future, “Any political ideology that stands against the values of the Republic would be concerned.” The government’s campaign against Muslims is directed against the rights of the entire working class, under conditions of mass opposition to social inequality and police violence. At the same time, it is aimed at dividing the working class along religious lines while promoting the far-right.



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