

# Questioning the Republic's Values: Nahel's Tragedy, Suburban Realities and Camus' "The Stranger"

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Photo by Nevzet Celik



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## **Questioning the Republic's Values: Nahel's Tragedy, Suburban Realities and Camus' 'The Stranger'**

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The suburbs in France have once again been thrown into chaos following the tragic killing of Nahel M, a 17-year-old teenager of Algerian and Moroccan descent, by the police. Initially, the police falsely alleged that the young man had tried to run over an officer. However, a [video](#) shared on social media revealed a different story. The footage showed the police pulling over a car in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, with two officers nearby. In a tragic turn of events, one of the officers pointed his weapon at the driver, resulting in Nahel's death.

This incident sparked widespread outrage, leading to protests, riots, fires, and vandalism in suburbs near Paris, Lyon, Marseille, and Grenoble. Numerous government buildings, shops, banks, and other places were targeted. To restore order, the government deployed over 45,000 police officers and used armored vehicles. As a result, more than 3,000 people were arrested.

### **Confronting Police Violence in French Suburbs**

Mounia, the mother of Nahel, places the responsibility for her son's tragic death on a specific individual rather than attributing blame to the entire police force. She emphatically [states](#), "I don't blame the police, I blame one person: the one who took the life of my son." Mounia highlights that the individual police officer targeted Nahel based on prejudice, perceiving him as "an Arab face, a little kid, and wanted to take his life." Crystal M. Fleming [describes](#) the incident as "Nahel's death is not an unsolvable mystery – it was the result of systemic racism."

This is not the first time such incidents have led to riots. In 2005, two teenagers died while hiding in an electric power substation to avoid police identity checks in the northern suburb of Paris, Clichy-sous-Bois. Similar to the current situation, the 2005 riots involved youth engaging in violent attacks, the burning of cars and public buildings, and demonstrations several cities. France declared a state of emergency that lasted for an extended period, resulting in more than 8,000 cars and numerous buildings being damaged, and thousands being arrested.

In 2016, the death of Adama Traoré, a black French man, while in police custody triggered protests against police brutality in France. His case drew comparisons to the George Floyd incident in the United States in 2020, making Traoré a symbol in the fight against police brutality in France. The subsequent investigation report in 2021 further revealed the role played by French police in his tragic death.

Rights groups have brought attention to the significant issue of police violence in France, particularly during prominent events such as the 2018 "gilets jaunes" protests, the 2022 Champions League finals, and the demonstrations against pension reforms. These incidents have led to calls for action in Paris to address this problem. Furthermore, France faced [criticism](#) at the United Nations during the Labor Day Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, where concerns were raised regarding racism and police violence.

Critics within French society have also raised their voices against police violence, with Patrick Baudouin, president of the Human Rights League ([LDH](#)), warning about the potential risks to civil liberties. The LDH specifically denounced incidents of police violence, citing a demonstration in the town of Sainte-Soline in April as a troubling example. These criticisms highlight the urgent need to address the issue at hand.

The fact that in 2022, the French national [police](#) reported 138 instances of fatal shots fired during incidents of non-compliance, and the 157 incidents recorded in 2021. The law allowing the use of firearms was initially enacted to address terrorism and integrated measures introduced after the 2015 Paris attacks and subsequent state of emergency. However, human rights groups have expressed criticism of the law, particularly since 2017, citing concerns over its expansion regarding the circumstances in which police officers can employ firearms.

In French suburbs, there is a widespread fear of the police. Academic [research](#) highlights that individuals with North African or sub-Saharan African backgrounds often experience unjust targeting through unnecessary identity checks. These findings indicate that people of immigrant origin, particularly from North African and sub-Saharan African backgrounds, have consistently voiced concerns about being unfairly singled out for discriminatory and unnecessary identity checks based on their skin color or assumed ethnicity, rather than their individual behavior.

Similarly, The Human Rights Watch [report](#) sheds light on the persistent problem of discriminatory and abusive identity checks carried out by French police. The report specifically highlights the targeting of Black and Arab youths, including children as young as 10, regardless of any evidence of wrongdoing. These practices are prevalent in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods with immigrant populations and are perceived as a display of authority rather than a genuine effort to identify potential criminal activity. Urgent reform of police powers is called for in the report to address this discrimination and bridge the growing divide between communities and law enforcement.

## **A Nation Divided? Exploring Social Divisions in France**

The political landscape in French society reveals a deepening division. Certain French police unions have [expressed](#) their stance, declaring themselves to be "at war" and emphasizing the need to enforce calm when confronted with these unruly groups. While this perspective has drawn criticism from left-wing politicians such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon of La France Insoumise,

it's worth noting that both Zemmour and Marine Le Pen have been warning about the potential for "a civil war" for years.

In response to the tragic incident, Kylian Mbappé, who himself grew up in the Paris suburb of Bondy, expressed his deep sorrow, and [tweeted](#), "I am heartbroken for my France. This situation is unacceptable. My thoughts are with the family and loved ones of Nael, this young angel taken away far too soon." Meanwhile, [a fundraiser](#) titled "Support for the family of the police officer from Nanterre" has generated over 800,000 euros (as of Monday), sparking a new controversy in France.

For a considerable period, France has grappled with social challenges in its suburban areas, commonly referred to as banlieues, with Paris being a focal point. While the capital city itself showcases a romanticized and sometimes exaggerated image, with its historical Haussmann-style landmarks, parks, cafes, and upscale shops, the surrounding suburbs are home to a population of over 9 million. These suburbs are predominantly inhabited by working-class individuals who reside in state-owned housing known as HLM. Characterized by towering Soviet-style buildings, these areas are primarily populated by people of diverse backgrounds, including those with ancestral ties to former French colonies in North and West Africa, as well as Sri Lanka and other regions of the world.

People living in the suburbs of France often face higher levels of poverty and experience racial and other forms of discrimination compared to those in other parts of the country. Similar to the Yellow Vests movement, residents of these areas express frustration with a system they see as not working properly. They highlight the excessive influence of the wealthy elite, banks, and big businesses. This has led to a significant loss of trust in democratic institutions, with a shared belief that France is plagued by deep-rooted issues. Many feel that the relationship between the government and its citizens has weakened, undermining the core values of the Republic.

Peter Gumbel sheds light on the prevailing [culture of elitism](#) in France, which he has witnessed since arriving in Paris in 2002. The education system promotes intense competition from a young age, reaching its peak in higher education at prestigious institutions known as grandes écoles. Although this system produces a privileged group of successful individuals who enter the ruling class, it leaves the majority feeling disheartened, unmotivated, or excluded.

The recent [elections](#) in France have exposed a significant socio-political divide. This rift has become evident between Macron's economic agenda, which is closely associated with the worlds of finance, media, and elite education in France, and the disillusioned bloc that comprises nearly 40 percent of the population. This bloc has chosen not to participate in the last two elections and has boycotted the French political system. The traditional left, which has struggled to instill hope since Hollande's tenure, has failed to resonate with its outdated social promises. Conversely, the far-right movement has gained momentum, with candidates such as Le Pen and Zemmour garnering substantial voter support. In the second round of the presidential race, Le Pen secured nearly 12 million votes, capitalizing on the influence of polemicist Eric Zemmour and his persuasive rhetoric.

To effectively address the challenges faced by suburban communities, it is crucial to prioritize both job creation and opportunities, as well as the development of cultural and social activities that resonate with their backgrounds and beliefs. These activities play a pivotal role in combatting isolation and preventing the rise of religious radicalization. Notably, Jean-Louis Borloo, the former French Minister of Environment, spearheaded an impactful [initiative titled](#) "Les banlieues: changer de regard, construire la France de demain" ("The Suburbs: Changing Perspectives, Building the France of Tomorrow"). This comprehensive plan encompasses a wide array of programs designed to facilitate significant social transformation in these marginalized areas.

Borloo presented a series of initiatives with the aim of fostering equal opportunities for residents living in the banlieues of France. These measures encompassed a wide range of areas, including the establishment of an academy to provide training for young individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods, preparing them for senior civil service positions. Another key aspect of the proposal involved the creation of school cities that would offer comprehensive support services for underprivileged children. Additionally, the plan included renovations for at-risk social housing buildings (HLM), the construction of digital campuses to enhance digital literacy among marginalized youth, and the implementation of employment strategies such as training programs in personal and home care services, as well as the creation of job opportunities specifically targeted at residents in priority neighborhoods. Furthermore, measures were envisioned to improve public transportation services and reduce disparities in access. However, despite the importance of the Borloo plan, it was dismissed by the Macron government at the time. The recent urban riots following Nahel's death have brought renewed attention to the [regret](#) expressed by several elected officials regarding the decision to abandon the plan back in 2018.

The recent tragedy of Nahel's death transcends mere religious, racial, or political upheaval. It serves as a poignant reflection of the collective frustration harbored towards an oppressive and exclusive state authority system, despite its claims of being a liberal democratic republic. Instead of adapting to the evolving times, this system often subjects its citizens to bureaucratic tendencies reminiscent of an outdated era, resulting in delayed services. This particularly affects the younger generation, irrespective of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, who were born and raised as French citizens and yearn for equal opportunities within the republic, especially those residing in the suburbs. There is a significant disconnect between the ideals of French democracy—freedom, equality, and solidarity—that they learn about, and the harsh realities they encounter in their everyday lives.

If Nahel's death occurred in a similar context, where he, an individual of Algerian or North African descent, was killed by the French police, one can draw parallels to the themes explored in Albert Camus' novel, "The Stranger." In the book, Camus delves into the senselessness of human actions and the apathy of society. The unjust death of Nahel, akin to the murder of the Arab man in the novel, serves as a poignant reminder of the repercussions of such actions and raises profound questions about societal norms, prejudice, and the absurdity of violence. Both instances prompt contemplation on the arbitrary nature of life and urge individuals and society to confront the consequences of their indifference and choices.

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