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U.S. courts the support of French Muslims

By Katrin Bennhold

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Ali Zahi, left, with friends in suburban Paris. Zahi said French elites, unlike Americans, had trouble imagining minorities as leaders. (Richard Harbus for the International Herald Tribune)

CLICHY-SOUS-BOIS, France: For Karim Zéribi, the highlight was shaking the hand of the candidate Barack Obama. For Ali Zahi, it was meeting the basketball star, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, his childhood hero. And Mohamed Hamidi still cannot quite believe that the minaret of a mosque he saw in Washington was taller than that in the village of his parents in Algeria.

Hamidi, a well-known blogger, Zahi, a local politician and Zéribi, the founder of a recruitment agency, are all French, Muslim and under 42. Each grew up, and works, in suburbs that became emblematic of the rioting that rocked France for three weeks in 2005.

And, during recent months, all three joined the small but growing ranks of young minority leaders in Europe invited to the United States on 21-day, tailor-made trips organized by the U.S. State Department - tours that softened their view of a superpower generally distrusted and disliked in their communities.

"Many young people think that America is waging a war on Muslims," said Zahi, 32, cabinet director for the mayor of Clichy-sous-Bois, the Paris suburb where the 2005 rioting started after the death of two teenagers.

"I tell them: America is many things," he said. "It is a country that has a black presidential candidate and a self-confident Muslim community. I tell them, the American people are hospitable and generous."

Since the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001, this kind of American diplomacy has tried to embrace the estimated 15 million Muslims in Europe, and the often frustrated young men and women increasingly likely to help shape the future of the Continent.

American embassies have been instructed to court second- and third-generation immigrants from North Africa, Turkey or Pakistan. The International Visitor Leadership program, whose past beneficiaries included President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Prime Minister Gordon Brown of Britain, have sharpened a focus on young Muslims.

After 9/11, said James Bullock, head of public affairs at the U.S. Embassy in Paris, the United States needed to reach minorities for whom "America has become a voodoo doll."

While "de-legitimizing the appeal of terrorist recruiters" is one aim, Bullock said, another is definitely "getting to know the future movers and shakers of Europe, because these young people are part of the future of Europe."

France is home to an estimated five million Muslims, the largest community in Western Europe. A plot to blow up the U.S. Embassy in 2001, and the busting of a handful of jihadist cells testified to radical sentiment, while minority communities seethed with resentment at unemployment and perceived discrimination.

Between 25 and 30 French citizens are chosen each year to go on the U.S. program; since the 2005 rioting, about a dozen have been of Muslim origin.

Reaction even to this modest outreach illustrates how sensitive it is.

After a Paris newspaper ran a front-page story last month listing a few cultural projects financed by the U.S. Embassy, indignation erupted. "The CIA in the suburbs" read the banner during a documentary by the public broadcaster France 2. The left-leaning magazine Marianne warned of an "American takeover of Arabs and blacks."

Bullock noted that the cultural program typically helped up to 100 projects a year with grants worth between \$1,000 and \$5,000. "It's not exactly the D-Day landing in the suburbs," he said.

Most Western countries tout their way of life - through embassies, cultural offices, consulates, scholarships, performances, student exchanges and other visits. The French, for example, run outreach programs in the Bronx, a borough of New York and in public schools in Washington. It also selects American "personalities of the future" to visit France.

"Often it is just a matter of showing people that the country is more complex than a media cliché," said Justin Vaisse, a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former adviser to the French Foreign Ministry on its visitor program.

Zéribi, 41, a local politician in Marseille, and the founder of APC Recrutement, the first French recruitment agency specialized in identifying talent among minorities, and Hamidi, 35, a high school teacher and editor of the popular Bondy Blog, returned from the United States early this month.

"It was not all pretty," Hamidi said, recalling a rough part of Washington, and visible poverty, even on the streets of New York City. In Jackson, Mississippi, the two men spent half a day patrolling with a black boxer-turned-police officer.

But Hamidi and Zéribi were impressed to see "every color" in government ministries in Washington. Unlike their parents, they are not observant Muslims. But they expressed surprise at the size of a mosque in Washington. In Los Angeles, they met a Saudi-American teacher preparing to run in local elections.

After going to an Obama rally in Philadelphia and shaking his hand, Hamidi shared the experience on his blog. Zéribi, son of an Algerian father and an Algerian-French mother, said his view of the United States had changed for good.

"I saw the American Dream with my own eyes. Barack Obama incarnates that dream," he said. Zéribi noted that like Obama, he has one Muslim grandmother and one Christian grandmother.

"I'm not naïve," said Hamidi. "I know why they invited us, but this was not clumsy lobbying. It was fun and we learned a lot."

One of nine children of an Algerian immigrant worker, he said that his students became intrigued by jihadist ideology in the 1990s, then turned against America with the Iraq war in 2003. The perception of unfair U.S. support for Israel against the Palestinians remains a driver of anti-Americanism, he said.

But the resentment is not clear-cut. "They all listen to rap and soul music and watch American films," Hamidi said.

Zahi traveled last autumn to Texas, Arkansas, Oregon, Washington and New York. He was thrilled to meet the basketball star, Johnson. At home, however, "several people have accused me of being a spy for the Americans," he said.

When the newspaper, *Le Parisien*, widely read in the suburbs, wrote about his trip, his photo appeared opposite an article alleging that the CIA was recruiting in the suburbs and a cartoon of a Muslim using a U.S. flag as his prayer mat.

All three men said they learned as much about France as the United States as a result of the program.

"It would be funny if it wasn't so serious - people saying we are agents," Zéribi said. "When did anyone ever accuse any of the white French politicians on that program of working for the CIA?"

Zahi said that French elites, unlike Americans, had trouble imagining minorities as future leaders.

"Maybe that is why some of the reactions in the French establishment were so paranoid when they learned that America is doing something for the French suburbs," he said. "Maybe they are afraid of a French Obama."