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The predicament of Europe's Muslims

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The Muslim presence in Europe, for the most part, is the product of the influx of migrants during the 1960s. This was a period that brought intensive waves of economic migration from former European colonies in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa.

The socio-ethnic makeup of Muslim communities in Europe consists primarily of three major groupings: North Africans, especially those from Morocco, the largest communities of which are in France and Belgium; Turks who reside in a number of EU countries, especially Germany; and Pakistani/Indian Muslims who are most heavily concentrated in the UK.

In addition, there are smaller and less concentrated communities originating from the Levant (Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon) in various European countries, from Indonesia (in Holland, primarily) and from sub-Saharan Africa (primarily in France, Belgium and Italy). Finally, there are the Muslims from the former Yugoslavia who have re-established themselves mostly in Germany.

According to available statistics, there are currently 13 million to 16 million Muslims in the EU. The largest portions are in France (5 million to 6 million), Germany (3.5 million to 4 million) and Italy (1.5 million to 2 million). This makes Islam the second most prevalent religion in Europe after Catholicism.

The Muslim presence in Europe can be divided into two chief phases: “tranquil Islam” from the 1960s to the late 1980s and “crisis Islam”, as European scholars term it, from 1989 to the present.

In the former, Muslim migrants were seen as temporary labourers and the question of identity had not surfaced prominently. The latter phase was marked by two major crises. The first was triggered by Ayatollah Khomeini’s fatwa sanctioning the murder of Salman Rushdie for his views on Islam as ostensibly expressed in the novel The Satanic Verses.

This brought the first real clash between Islam and European culture and specifically between the question of freedom of expression in Europe and Islamic articles of faith that Muslims deem unquestionable.

The second crisis erupted over the prohibition against the wearing of the veil in French public schools on the grounds that this conflicted with the principles of French secularism. This crisis brought to the fore as never before the identity crisis between Muslims and the European societies in which they lived.

Other crises followed, including the crisis surrounding the Danish cartoons that were deemed offensive to the Prophet Mohamed, the repercussions of which were felt throughout Europe. Prior to this there was another crisis over the prohibition against the display of religious emblems in public institutions in France.

In addition, there were several terrorist attacks at the international and European level, most notably the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, the Madrid train station bombing of 2004 and the London Underground attack of 2005. These incidents increased strains in the relationship between Muslims and European authorities that began to hone in on the security dimension of the immigration/assimilation question.

At the same time, Muslim groups in Europe focused increasingly on promoting Islamic identity and pushing it from the private into the public sphere through the construction of mosques and the wearing of the veil.

To many Europeans, this conflicted with the religious neutrality of modern European culture in which religion is kept within the personal or private sphere while to Muslims Islam is a mode of life that encompasses the individual and the community.

Accordingly, the increasing clash between the rising emphasis on Islamic identity among new generations of immigrants and European societies stems from the fact that the principles of religious neutrality and the separation between religion and the state (or secularism as Arabs commonly understand it) means that religion has ceased to play the role of a driving force in social and political life. As a result, the “sacred” has left the public sphere and been confined to the private sphere.

The clash is also connected with a common set of European values that grant total religious freedom to practitioners of all faiths, including freedom to convert to another faith, on condition

that their practices or behaviour do not conflict with the basic values of the European community, disrupt public order or infringe on the freedom of others and the secular form of the state.

Therefore, to many segments of European opinion, European societies do not impose restrictions on the freedom to subscribe to religious beliefs but on the means of expressing them (building mosques and wearing the veil in the case of Islam, for example) or on practices that conflict with European laws and values (such as polygamy in Islam).

In this context, the presence of Islam in parts of Europe has stirred controversy over the nature of the "prevalent secularist culture" and the future of European societies under the application of the separation between religion and the state at a time when the dilemma of Islam in Europe revolves around its visibility in the public sphere, whether through the construction of mosques, the wearing of the veil or the development of Muslim graveyards, all of which press home the desire to differ from what prevails in Europe.

In a sense, therefore, this can be seen as a clash between the culture of the majority and the culture of a minority. It should also be mentioned that the problem of Muslim identity and assimilation in Europe stems, in part and perhaps indirectly, from the relationship between European authorities and the immigrant communities' countries of origin.

The governments or religious authorities in the immigrants' countries of origin tend to try to impose national religious outlooks and modes of behaviour on expatriate communities in Europe to prevent the rise of an intellectual or ideological trend that is more open to European value systems as it is feared that such developments could lead to a rupture with the "established" form of Islam or have repercussions on the political regimes and general religious mood of societies in the countries of origin.

Another crucial factor involved in the question of assimilation involves mutual stereotyping. On the one hand, many quarters of European society associate Muslims with the terrorist crises and developments in the Arab region and the Middle East in general.

On the other, many Muslim quarters in Europe frame European/Western attitudes towards events in the Arab region in the coloniser-colonised paradigm. Such attitudes generate negative outlooks towards assimilation among Muslims and reinforce the trend to push the display of Islamic identity in the public sphere which, therefore, could be seen as a barometer of tension between Muslim communities and the European societies in which they exist.

Both sides — the Muslim communities and European societies — are caught in a two-pronged predicament shaped by the demands of the separation between religion and state, which constitutes a cultural obstacle for the Muslims as much as the pressing of Islamic identity in the public sphere conflicts with the principles of religious neutrality in Europe.

This predicament hampers the beginning of meaningful negotiations between Muslims and European societies that should give Muslims opportunity to express themselves fully. Accordingly, Muslims of Europe and the new generations in particular should dedicate greater

efforts to formulating a political discourse that factors in respect for the religious neutrality that prevails in European societies.

Such a discourse will help gain support from influential social and cultural sectors and especially the younger generations. In like manner, European Muslims should approach the principle of separation between religion and the state from the perspective that it presents a greater opportunity for democratic expression, as opposed to being an obstacle to Islam.

Negative attitudes have prevented Muslims from effectively availing themselves of the available means of freedom. For example, the freedom that European societies offer to establish associations that do not discriminate on an ethnic basis opens horizons for reaching the bedrock of European society, using means and instruments consistent with European culture.

In addition, European Muslims should gradually become more involved in political parties in their capacity as European citizens as opposed to citizens of non-European origin. Previous waves of immigrants have succeeded in advancing their religious identity using European democratic mechanisms, as was the case with Jewish immigrants, for example.