

THE FUTURE OF EUROPE: ISLAMOPHOBIA?

The future of Europe is closely linked to the successful integration of the Muslim immigrants into European societies. Europe should seek to reach cultural pluralism in contrast to assimilation or exclusion in order to avoid discrimination against Muslims. The author argues that both Muslim immigrants and host societies have mutual responsibilities in this respect. Both have to go through a mental change, eventually resulting in the redefinition of their identities. However, if Europe fails to integrate the Muslim immigrants, it will also fail to unite the Europeans under a common political identity. It will have to pay a price through social conflict, extreme nationalism and hatred amongst its fellow citizens.

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‘P’erhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mohammed.’¹

It has always been a subject of discussion: How the course of European history would be, had the Frankish commander Martel not beaten the Muslim armies and prevented them from moving into Europe in the 732 Poitiers War. The quotation from the famous historian Edward Gibbon reflects this speculative interpretation of history. It is interesting that European intellectuals have been referring to Gibbon’s interpretation very often these days. Especially after September 11 and attacks in Europe, the deep historical anxieties of Europeans against Muslims have been reemerging. But this time the undesired guests are not Islam armies; they are Muslim immigrants.

Euro-Muslims

Today about 23 million Muslims² accounting for 4.5 percent of the total, live in whole of Europe (not including Turkey) compared with only 800,000 in 1950. Each year around 1 million immigrants mostly from the Muslim countries are flowing into Europe. Birth rates of European Muslims are more than three times of those of non-Muslim Europeans.³ It is estimated that Muslims will comprise at least 20 percent of Europe’s population in 2050. This would be the outcome of not only the increase in Muslim population but also the decline in general European population. As *The Economist* puts it properly, in many parts of Europe “in local papers death announcements speak of “Pierre” and “Charles;” the births are of “Moussa” and “Fatih.”⁴

Even though historically the identity of Europe was constructed mainly through the “otherization” of Islam, it remained quite unfamiliar until the second half of the 20th century. With the migration of large number of immigrant communities of Islamic background during the second half of the 20th century, Europeans started to discover Muslims. Hence, the image of Muslims began to go hand in hand with the concept of immigration. Muslim immigrants tended to settle down in the poorer neighborhoods of industrialized, urban areas such as the suburbs of major French cities, the Ruhr industrial area in Germany or the greater London area in the UK. As a consequence, they have been in contact with the urban population of the Western societies and been a major subject of discussion in mainstream politics and media.

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Routledge, 1997).

² US Department of State, *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom*, 2003.

³ Ömer Taflıpnar, “Europe’s Muslim Street,” *Foreign Policy*, March 2003, p.77.

⁴ *The Economist*, 5 February 2004.

Islamophobia

After the collapse of communist regimes, unemployment in Europe dramatically increased putting immigrants in the spotlight. They were blamed to be a threat to the welfare, jobs and prosperity of the middle classes. Muslim immigrants with whom the Europeans had to share the scarce resources and jobs were stigmatized as a scapegoat. This was “white middle-class nationalism.”⁵ Meanwhile, at the European Union level, the Schengen Agreement introduced strict rules against outsiders with the aim of creating a *Fortress Europe*. After September 11, the economic exclusivist approach transformed into a social and cultural one. Muslims who had been believed to threaten the system as immigrants began to be charged with much more dangerous attributes. The principal threat shifted from the economic burden to the danger brought about by their culture. A new racism emerged based on cultural differences claiming the incompatibility of Muslims with the European culture. Even third generation citizen Muslims have been perceived as dangerous outsiders. The popularity of political parties such as Le Pen’s French National Front, British National Party, Austrian Freedom Party, Belgian Flemish Bloc, Italian Northern League and Dutch List Party reveals the scope of reaction towards immigrants. The “Muslim card” has been the strongest asset of such parties in gaining the support of ordinary Europeans.

Suspicion against Muslims turned into hostility creating an *Islamophobia* all over Europe. For most Europeans, Islam is believed to have a connection with terror and violence. Muslims are identified as an enemy inside with international links. Events in Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran are perceived as being representative of Muslims in Europe. Especially, the war presented against terrorism is perceived by a number of Europeans as a clash of cultures and religions. Spanish ex-Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar’s claim that “The problem with al-Qaeda came as long ago as 1,300 years” indicates how Islam is linked with extremists.⁶

In mainstream politics and media, Islamophobic sentiments are presented as natural. Statements of political leading figures have contributed to the Islamophobic views, such as Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi claiming that “Western culture is superior to Muslim culture.”⁷ European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia reports that after September 2001, Muslims have become targets of increased hostility and have faced increased physical and verbal abuse. Mosques and Islamic centers and people with visual identifiers such as turbans or headscarves have become targets.

Islamophobia has been rising even in countries that have been proud of their tolerant culture. In the Netherlands, after the murder of a film-maker Theo Van

⁵ Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe* (Macmillan Press, 1995), p.154.

⁶ *The Economist*, 28 July 2005.

⁷ Christopher Allen and Jorgen Nielsen, “Summary Report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001,” *European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia* (2002), p.47.

Gogh by a Moroccan immigrant in November 2004, mosques and schools of the Muslims have been under attack. According to a July 2005 poll by *The Guardian*, thousands of Muslims have been suffering from increased Islamophobia in the UK. More than half a million Muslims considered leaving Britain after the London terrorist attacks in July 2005, with “one in five saying they or a family member have faced abuse or hostility since the attacks.”⁸ Stereotypes and prejudices on Muslims that had already been existent, experienced a dramatic increase in the public domain. Those historical and latent prejudices found a suitable setting to emerge.

After the London bombings, European governments have been reconsidering their counter-terrorism strategies. Tougher measures and tighter controls are being brought against extremists. However, such measures have effects on ordinary innocent Muslim citizens, as well. Muslims may even be “punished for the sort of violent speech that might be overlooked if it was, say, uttered by a drunken football fan.”⁹ Threatening naturalized Muslim citizens with deportation or with other similar punishments further alienates them from their host societies. According to a *Daily Telegraph* poll, majority of British Muslims believe that “British political leaders don’t mean it when they talk about equality; they regard the lives of white British people as more valuable than the lives of British Muslims.” Even though majority of Muslims condemn the London bombings, a number of them are seriously alienated from society, even feeling sympathy for the bombers. The same poll shows that 24 percent of the respondents have some “sympathy with the feelings and motives of those who carried out the attacks.”¹⁰ This is noteworthy in the sense that in absolute numbers it amounts to 400,000 British Muslims.

Exclusion, Assimilation or Integration?

Europeans’ approach against Muslims deeply contradicts with the values of cultural plurality, tolerance and respect for differences, which the very identity of Europe is supposed to represent. The current situation of European states’ relationship with Muslim immigrants demonstrates this fact clearly. There are three ideal models in which this relationship may develop.¹¹ In the exclusion model, immigrants have merely a physical presence but no accommodation with European societies. They are defined in terms of their ethnic origin. The state provides the immigrants with limited rights, allowing them to create a society within the society. This model ends up with the isolation and segregation of immigrants. Germany seems to be the best example for exclusion, even though it has been providing its immigrants with rights by moving from the *jus sanguinis* system to the *jus soli*, where citizenship is granted according to birthplace instead of ancestry.

⁸ *Guardian/ICM Poll*, July 2005.

⁹ *The Economist*, 13-19 August 2005.

¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph/YouGov Survey*, July 2005.

¹¹ Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (MacMillan, 1993).

The assimilation model has the ultimate objective of the total absorption of identity of immigrants. The state does not acknowledge the immigrants as different communities and thus, the immigrants are supposed to give up their cultural and linguistic features to be eventually absorbed by the host societies. In most of the European countries, Muslims are not even recognized as minority. Since, they are not covered by the classical national minority definition of the European states based on ethnicity and race, they are deprived of any minority rights. Immigrants, in fact, acquire a legal status with the condition that they assimilate into the dominant culture. French *Jacobin* state tradition which does not recognize cultural differences in the public sphere serves as a prototype. The ban of 2004 on wearing of religious symbols such as headscarves, kippa and crucifix in public schools is a clear indicator of the position of the neutral French state vis-à-vis different cultural groups.

Last but not least, the integration or the multicultural model admits the diversity brought in by the immigrants with the condition that they integrate with the political culture. Immigrants are accepted as full members of the society even though they possess a different cultural background. There are few exceptions such as the Netherlands that is-or used to be- one of the closest countries to the multicultural model. Unfortunately, most of the European countries are positioned between the exclusion and assimilation models.

Yet, in the multicultural model, Muslims, with their different backgrounds, are expected to challenge the conservative Europe and open up the possibility for a liberal and tolerant one. The new forms of life imported into the European societies will coexist equally only under such a political culture. If Europe is going to be based on cultural pluralism, the cultural autonomy of immigrants shall be recognized without being forced to assimilate into or being excluded from the host culture. The basis of integration should be European states' neutrality vis-à-vis cultural communities. Not only outsiders but surely the Europeans themselves are also expected to adopt values of cultural plurality and tolerance.

Islam and Values of Europe: A Clash of Civilizations?

A multicultural Europe is supposed to be an inclusive one but as with every society, it too has its boundaries, and should therefore limit the scope of integration. This is a significant issue, because even if Europe is based on tolerance and liberal values, it must set certain limits to protect itself. Tolerance does not mean wide-open borders without any criteria for membership. As Carens puts it, "open immigration would change the character of the community but it should not leave the community without any character."¹²

¹² Joseph H. Carens, "Aliens and Citizens: The Case for Open Borders," *Review of Politics*, Vol.49, 1987, p.271.

What Europeans and Muslims share need not be common cultural attributes and traditions but the members of the society are required to be loyal towards common political values and practices. Membership is founded on loyalty towards “shared public, social space; a set of abstract principles and responsibilities such as human rights, respect for justice, protection of the environment, expectations of a better future and a productive life; and the rationalized organization and routine of everyday praxis.”¹³ And Muslim immigrants are expected to comply with these values and institutions. They are not asked to give up their cultural traditions, but are expected to respect and imbibe democratic values, traditions and practices. Muslim immigrants, who refuse to adopt such values and traditions, would be a “ticking time-bomb”¹⁴ for the European democracies as the latest events have revealed.

It is a fact that Muslims face difficulties in integrating with host societies. The question that arises is whether Islam has a compatibility problem with the prevalent values in Europe, as is claimed by the pan-Europeans. Therefore, the integration problem is linked to the issue of compatibility of Islam with liberal values and institutions such as tolerance, gender equality, democracy, civil rights, citizenship and secularization. Events such as the Iran Revolution, Rushdie affair in Britain and the rise of Taliban have caused serious doubts about this compatibility. According to 62 percent of the French people, the values of Islam are not compatible with those of the French Republic.¹⁵ Such reservations have triggered the questioning of integration of Muslims into European societies as they are perceived as a challenge to the very identity of Europe.

Being the subject of intense debate for decades, this issue appears as a deep philosophical question that cannot be comprehensively addressed here. However, there are significant points to be emphasized. Since universal values are assumed to be valid and binding for every single culture, they are not in anyway under any culture’s monopoly. Hence, every culture has the chance to live along with universal values and traditions such as pluralism, tolerance, democracy etc. Even for Islam, which does not permit the separation of religion and state, there exist numerous historical examples where a separation has been possible, Turkey being an apparent model. With the words of Bernard Lewis “If Islam is an obstacle to freedom, to science, to economic development, how is it that Muslim society in the past was a pioneer in all three, even when they were much closer in time to the sources and inspiration of their faith than they are now?”¹⁶

This compatibility is also confirmed by a number of Muslims who simultaneously practice their religion and abide by the rules and principles of the political culture under which they are living. Muslim immigrants are struggling to become full

¹³ Yasemin Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship* (University of Chicago, 1994), p.166.

¹⁴ *The Economist*, 31 March 2005.

¹⁵ *IPSOS-LCI-Le Point Poll*, (2003).

¹⁶ Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Phoenix, 2002), p.174.

partners in the host societies. Young generation Muslims do better in schools, have better command of the host country language, achieve better performance at academic and professional life and easily socialize with host country societies. As a result, they have a life-style compatible with secular values. As the title of his book *To be a European Muslim* points out, Tariq Ramadan argues that Muslims may well integrate into European societies and “be at the same time fully Muslim and fully Western.”¹⁷ Europe is no longer considered as *dar-al-harb*, the land of war, since it is the land for millions of Muslims. In fact, Ramadan suggests a new category of *dar-al-shahada*, the land of witness, for European societies in which Muslims can give witness to their faith, but fully participate in the political and social life of the host societies. Hence, the concern of Muslims in Europe is to be able to practice their religious faith in societies based on Judeo-Christian or secular values and at the same time integrate into the host society and have a say on the political and social life.

Then why did the issue of compatibility arise? Let’s get the reply from Lewis again: “The question is not ‘What has Islam done to the Muslims?’ but ‘What have the Muslims done to Islam?’” The second question’s response will show how specific schools and doctrines have degraded Islam; the Taliban being the latest example.

There are no serious issues before the compatibility of Islam with the prevailing values in Europe. In fact, what is in the spotlight is the compatibility of Muslims with the European societies more so than the compatibility of Islam with universal values. In other words, Islam as a religion is not questioned as much as Muslims are being questioned culturally. Therefore, this is not a pure religious exclusion. It is more a *Muslimophobia* than Islamophobia. Religion is one aspect among others, which makes Muslims appear different. Muslims may be marked by their faith but cultural, economic, social and political reasons lie at the heart of this exclusion.

In fact, in many instances religion does not appear as the primary motive. In Western Europe religion is losing its historical importance in binding communities. According to Gallup International Polls, for most of the Western Europeans (51 percent) God does not matter that much.¹⁸ The percentage of Europeans regularly attending to religious services is only 20 percent, while this figure drops to 10 percent in countries such as the Netherlands, UK, Germany, Sweden and Denmark. On a weekly basis, there are more mosque goers in England than church goers. Western European countries seem no longer to be Christian societies in its classical definition. Europeans, in fact, are characterized as post-religious or post-Christian societies. Another interesting development was that, following September 11 the Christian churches did not avoid the Muslim communities; instead they increased

¹⁷ Tariq Ramadan, “To be a European Muslim,” *The Islamic Foundation* (1998).

¹⁸ *Gallup International Millennium Survey*, (1999).

their contacts and tried to promote interfaith dialogue respecting their common Abrahamic roots. Speaking about politics, the two wars that Europeans have entered into in the last decade have been on behalf of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. Finally, the draft European constitution, yet after intense debate, was decided not to include a reference to God and Christian values but reference to universal values.

This, obviously, does not mean that there are not any claims perceiving Islam as a threat to the core of Christianity and the values it stands for. However, it seems that religious exclusion is only one but quite weak factor among others that cause reactions against Muslims. The main reason of exclusion seems to rise from the combination of economic, political and cultural factors rather than absolute religious factors. The clearest evidence of this fact is that different traditions, life styles and even outfits of Muslims are the factors that have been under attack the most. For instance, the attacks after September 11 against Indian Sikhs were purely related to their physical appearance, as they cover their heads with turbans although they have nothing to do with Muslims or Islam. It is obvious that the fear in Europe arises from intolerance against differences.

Reality of Muslim Immigrants

It is obvious that beyond any compatibility problems, there exist some other factors that push the Muslim immigrants to the margins. First of all, the socio-economic conditions: Before participating in the European polity and society, immigrants have much more urgent concerns. Since they come to Europe primarily for economic reasons, their concern above all is to find a job and a place to live. Employment, education and housing conditions of Muslim immigrants are far worse than other groups in the host societies. Unemployment rate among Muslims are almost twice as much as that of non-Muslims. Educational and vocational success is inadequate, participation of Muslim women in the workforce and social life is limited. Among all other religious groups, Muslims are the poorest. For instance, “just 48% of British Muslims reported that they were economically active in 2001, compared with 65% of Christians, 67% of Hindus and 75% of those who professed no religion.”¹⁹ As a result, expressing their identities or striving to integrate has always been of secondary importance.

Besides, there exists strong internal fragmentation among Muslims in Europe. Not only do sectarian and traditional differences exist within Islam but also the European Muslims have quite different backgrounds with respect to national, ethnic and historical roots. What does a Turkish worker in Germany have in common with a North African immigrant residing in France other than more or less similar socio-economic conditions? Socio-political and generational splits contribute to this division. This does not mean that Muslims do not identify themselves with Islam. In fact, majority of Muslims still choose to define themselves

¹⁹ *The Economist*, 14 July 2005.

through their religious background. 41 percent of British Muslims under 35 perceive religion as their main source of identity.²⁰ In any case, the lack of a unified community is an obstacle before their expression of identities and this obviously impairs their participation in and interaction with the host societies.

There is also the problem of representation. Since there is no hierarchy in Islam, there is the lack of an official leader or organization that would represent the Muslims or get in contact with their European counterparts. Even though there are efforts of some governments to nationalize Muslim populations through Muslim organizations recognized by the state such as the Muslim Council of Britain or the French Council of the Muslim Faith, this “one-size-fits- all” approach overlooks the diversities among different Muslim groups and favors some groups over others. Muslim councils established by the governments have not been successful in resolving the representation problem so far. Muslims are underrepresented in respective national political organs, as well. In fact, Muslims themselves choose not to be politically active. “In France, where 92 percent of adult citizens have registered to vote, the corresponding figure among Muslim citizens is only 37 percent.”²¹

Some Muslim communities in Europe also have very strong ties with their countries of origin, which negatively influences the integration process. They bring spouses from their home country; have little interaction with the host societies, and create a society within a society. They do not feel close to the societies where they reside. For instance, “about two-thirds (of the Dutch Muslims) said they would not want their daughters to marry a non-Muslim.”²²

With all these hurdles, Muslim immigrants have not been able to properly integrate into the European societies. It should be emphasized that none of these factors that complicate the integration process are directly related to the cultural attributes of Muslims.

Integration or Breakdown?

Why is it that the integration problem needs to be so urgently resolved? There appear several factors that force the European countries to revise their traditional exclusivist approach. According to counter-terrorism officials’ estimations, 1-2 percent of the European Muslims could be involved in some type of extremist activity. In absolute values, the figure is amazing: 250,000-500,000 individuals.²³

All of the terrorists involved in September 11 had some connection with European countries. “European countries, since September 11, have arrested 20 times more

²⁰ *The Economist*, 21 July 2005.

²¹ Timothy Savage, “Europe and Islam: Crescent Waxing, Cultures Clashing,” *The Washington Quarterly*, (Summer 2004) p.36.

²² *The Economist*, 31 March 2005.

²³ Savage (2004), p.31.

terrorism suspects than the United States.”²⁴ These figures prove the fact that Europe has been the preferred location for training and recruiting terrorists. Economically deprived or socially excluded Muslims are the target groups of the extremists. Once the host societies exclude those immigrants experiencing a culture shock, radical Islamist groups do not miss the opportunity to recruit those young men. These recruits are the “born-again” Islamists prepared to carry out anything that is asked of them. It is worthy of note that “according to German and French experts, only a minority of European Islamist terrorists had been passionate fanatics in their Muslim home countries prior to coming to Europe.”²⁵ As Timothy Garton Ash argues, prior to the “war on terror” there is another war. It’s the war to stop these young Muslims to become terrorists in the first place. “(T)his war to avoid a larger war will only be won if ordinary citizens across Europe are consciously engaged in it, through millions of commonplace interactions with people of different color and faith. These are the experiences that determine whether the Muslim immigrants who already live among us in such large numbers will turn towards or away from Islamist extremism, and eventually terrorism.”²⁶

Even though today Muslims are not very much politically active, in the coming decades they will play a greater role in domestic politics. The issue of integration of Muslim immigrants into the European societies resembles that of the Afro-Americans into the United States in the 1950s. The percentage of Muslims in France- roughly about nine percent, is close to the ten percent of black population of the 1950s’ United States. “Blacks in America” had been the top political and social agenda item of the country up to the 21st century. “Muslims in Europe” will definitely occupy the agenda of Europe for the coming decades. In the Europe of 2050, where Muslims comprise about 20 percent of the total population, it would become impossible for politicians to ignore the “Muslim immigrants” reality.

One other factor that would force Europeans to consider the integration issue more caringly would be their respective foreign policies. Unlike US, Europe is geographically close to the Muslim world and thus, has to define its security policies according to the adjacent Islamic world and the views of its Muslim population. Moreover, as Savage puts forward, “in cost-benefit terms it is generally easier to respond to Muslims’ concerns about foreign policy than to those about domestic matters, given both the generally limited political and financial resources required and the views of their non-Muslim constituencies.”²⁷

The immigration issue has a close link with the aging problem of the European societies, as well. As a result of declining fertility rates and increasing median age, Western European countries have been facing a serious aging problem. According to UN projections, sharp drops in fertility rates will cause a population

²⁴ Frederick Kempe, “Europe’s Middle East Side Story,” *Wall Street Journal*, 29 July 2003.

²⁵ Savage (2004), p.33.

²⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, “Our New Guernica,” *The Guardian*, 10 March 2005.

²⁷ Savage (2004), p.40.

decline of 40 million in the EU countries from now and 2050.²⁸ Meanwhile, the median age will rise from 39 to 46.5. From 2006, the post-World War II generations will be entering into retirement ages that will eventually create a demand for labor. UN projections indicate that, in the event that immigration into Europe is totally prevented, the total population of the EU countries would drop from 375 million in 2000 to 311 million in 2050. In order to keep the level of working population at its present level, Europe needs about 1.4 million migrants per year until 2050, this meaning a total of 70 million. In fact, the UN report presents immigration as one of the solutions to the aging problem of the European societies. However, the 1990-2000 figures indicate that the average of annual migrants entering the EU is approximately 850,000. Of course, expecting to resolve the overall ageing issue solely via immigration would be an underestimation of the underlying problem. But this does not change the fact that the European states and societies need to revise their approach against immigrants.

European Muslims into European Citizens

The issue of accommodation and integration of Muslims into the European societies is becoming much more urgent as the conflict between the West and Islam is becoming deeper particularly due to the violence taking place in Iraq and Palestine. Of course, Muslims and Europeans both have a mutual responsibility in this respect and both have to go through a mental change, eventually resulting in the redefinition of their identities. Muslims should adopt the rules and practices of the social life in Europe without creating a parallel society, while Europeans should recognize the “Muslim reality” and accept the diversity brought in with them. European governments should draw the right line between controlling extremism and encouraging diversity.

If Europe fails to integrate the Muslim immigrants, it will also fail to unite the Europeans under a common political identity. It will have to pay a price through social conflict, extreme nationalism and hatred amongst its fellow citizens. In order to become a genuinely multicultural society, Europe has to recognize different forms of life and take care of issues brought about by immigration without falling into the Eurocentrism trap.

It is apparent that the European countries and thus, the European Union will be facing a harsh dilemma in the coming decades: On the one hand *Fortress Europe*, which excludes other cultures and societies both at political and societal levels; and on the other, a dependent but hesitant Europe, that has to revise its cynical attitude and strict policies against outsiders for the sake of its own political, psychological and social interests. Europe will generate a peaceful future to the extent that it resolves this dilemma and transforms Europeans and European Muslims into European citizens, without any discrimination. European identity, which has been an image, a discourse and a dream for centuries, will then become a reality.

²⁸ United Nations Secretariat, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Replacement Migration: Is it A Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations*, ESA/P/WP.160, (2000).