

The relationship between Islam and Western Europe

This month's newsletter focuses on the relationship between Islam and Western Europe.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US brought Islam, with its varied aspects and implications, to the attention of a wide array of institutions and actors.

Just as some US citizens thought that a terrorist attack could not happen on home soil, many in Europe thought the same. This view held true despite the fact that Mohammed Atta, one of the assailants in the 9/11 attacks, studied in Germany. The 2004 Madrid train bombings proved such views wrong. Indeed, shortly after the bombings the government presumed members of the Basque separatist organisation ETA were the perpetrators. But as the investigation continued, evidence pointed to Islamic fundamentalists as having carried out the attacks. These events again made it clear that the problems arising from Muslim immigration were not being adequately addressed. Along with unease over Muslim immigrants in Europe, a heated debate arose over European Muslims, their rights, duties and identity. Questions about how many potential terrorists were living in Europe, why Muslims seemingly were not adapting to the Western societies they lived in, and why some Muslim women insisted on wearing head scarves came to the forefront of numerous discussions in media, research, politics and among the public in general. The discussion intensified when the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published the now infamous cartoons of Mohammed in September 2005. Riots and heated debates over the relationship between Muslim and Western values were the result.

It is unavoidable to note that most of the questions which are regularly at the center of the recurring debates about Muslim immigration are of a religious nature.

What can be gained from comparing the different situations in different European countries? The media focus moved from the Netherlands, where filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered in 2004, to Denmark where the cartoons were published. It shifted to France in 2005, where heavy suburban riots broke out, and then to Germany, where a school was overwhelmed by the outbreak of violence among its mainly Arab and Turkish pupils in 2006.

Even if there are similar problems and discussions in different European countries, it is important to look at each country individually. France, for example, stands out with its huge concentration of North African Muslims, who are concentrated in the suburbs ("banlieues"). These have become veritable ghettos. Belgium and the Netherlands also have large concentrations of Muslims from North Africa.

In Germany, the capital's Muslim population is dominated by Turks. A large portion of Muslims in Switzerland come from the Balkan region, often former refugees from the Yugoslavian wars.

These distinctions are important when addressing the problems arising from Muslim immigration, especially when one attempts to weave religious customs and traditions into the values of the respective countries.

In this context, one of the most important questions is whether Muslim immigrants can be integrated into Western European societies. One aspect of successful integration is especially pressing: How can Muslim immigrants integrate into Christian-based Western societies without completely giving up their religious traditions?

Tariq Said Ramadan, a controversial Swiss Muslim academic and theologian, asks whether a special Islam for Europe is needed. He advocates a reinterpretation of Islamic texts and emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of Islamic society. Ramadan believes that Muslims in Europe have to establish a "European Islam" and urges them to partake and engage in the shaping of European society. He believes that Islam is a useful antidote to problems he perceives to be associated with secularism in Europe. Many young European Muslims consider Ramadan a leading figure. The US magazine Time named him among the 100 most important intellectual innovators of the century. Some of his critics, on the other hand, claim that Islam is incompatible with democracy, freedom or other values of the liberal Western tradition.

The Christian Science Monitor has a portrait about Ramadan and his ideas: A middle way and a radical idea.

The UK-based Prospect magazine has an interview with Ramadan in its July 2006 edition. Topics include the Quran and its interpretation, the wearing of headscarves, apostasy and the situation of Muslims in Europe.

In The Weekly Standard, a magazine based in Washington, DC, US, foreign affairs and counterterrorism consultant Olivier Guitta explains why the US State Department was right to deny Ramadan a US visa.

Silvia Azzouzi-Staubli
MA UZH

1.1 Works on integration, "Euro-Islam" and the daily lives of Muslims

Euro-Islam info, Paris, France

Euro-Islam.info is a research network on comparative research on Islam and Muslims in Europe. The information and research papers on the website are compiled by scholars and doctoral students from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, the UK and the Netherlands.

Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE), Leicestershire, UK

FIOE is a non-profit European organization which provides a framework for its member organizations and institutions. FIOE offers reports and documents about European-Islam issues.

Ghent Centre for Islam in Europe, by the Ghent University, Belgium

This website provides research papers on Islam in Europe and especially in Belgium.

A special section deals with the challenges of multiculturalism in relation to the EU and Islam.

Between Suicide Bombings and Burning Banlieues: The Multiple Crises of Europe 's Parallel Societies

This paper by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels, Belgium examines the multiple crises of Europe 's parallel societies. The study identifies the role and influence of political Islam in European society specifically in France, the Netherlands and Russia.

Institute of European Affairs (IEA), Dublin, Ireland

The IEA was founded to study Irish policy on European integration. The institute conducts seminars and research on immigration and integration in Europe.

Justice and Home Affairs

The Justice and Home Affairs Journal is published by the Institute of European Affairs (IEA) in Dublin, Ireland. The April 2006 Justice and Home Affairs issue focuses on the integration of immigrants in the EU and on growing US concern about Islamism in Europe.

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden, The Netherlands

ISIM conducts interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities.

Shades of Islamism

Shades of Islamism is published by International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) in Leiden, The Netherlands. The journal provides articles on different issues related to Islam in contemporary societies.

Muslims in Europe: Economic Worries Top Concerns About Religious and Cultural Identity

This June 2006 survey report by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in Washington, DC, US, shows that European Muslims worry more about economic factors like unemployment than about their religious and cultural identity.

Muslims in Europe, by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Washington, DC, US

This website provides a variety of resources on Muslims in Europe, including reports, event transcripts, polling data and news clips.

British Muslims Monthly Survey (BMMS), by the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, University of Birmingham, UK

The BMMS presents a monthly abstract of press reporting on Islam in Great Britain.

Europe and Islam, by openDemocracy, London, UK

This website provides a forum for interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims on issues concerning Muslim identity in Europe, as well as related articles and reports.

Europe: Integrating Islam, by the Council on Foreign Relations, New York and Washington, DC, US

This website offers reports and information on think tanks, government agencies, educational institutions and nongovernmental organizations related to the subject of integrating Islam in Europe.

Euro-Islam: The Dynamics of Effective Integration, by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, US

This website provides the transcript of the June 2006 conference entitled “Euro - Islam: The Dynamics of Effective Integration.”

Islam City Forum

Islam City Forum provides a platform for internet users to discuss issues related to Islam and Europe, as well as other topics.

Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (CSIC), by the University of Birmingham, UK

The Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations (CSIC) is a joint Muslim-Christian graduate teaching and research institute. CSIC's programs give equal attention to the theoretical dimensions of Christian-Muslim relations and the situations of communities in plural contexts. They also investigate the relationships between the two spheres. The website provides the CSIC Occasional Papers series, as well as the CSIC newsletter for free download.

1.2 Official Documents

The Council of Europe Recommendation 1162 (1991) on the Contribution of the Islamic Civilisation to European Culture

This website by the Council of Europe provides the Parliamentary Assembly's 1991 recommendation on the contribution of the Islamic civilization to European culture.

Government Response to the Intelligence and Security Committee's Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005

This report by the UK Intelligence and Security Committee provides the government's responses to the recommendations Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee submitted in its report on the terrorist attacks in London's subway system in July 2005.

1.3 Research Reports and Papers

A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam

This website features a downloadable version of I A Ibrahim's book, A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam, a guide for non-Muslims wishing to learn more about Islam, Muslims and the Quran. Chapters include information on the Prophet Mohammed, the Quran, the five pillars of Islam, basic beliefs, as well as human rights, justice, terrorism and women in Islam. The website also suggests websites for further reading. Also available in other languages.

Multiculturalism and Extremism: The Insider-Outsider Debate

This September 2005 paper was published by the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS) in Singapore. This paper reviews UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's proposed action plan to reform the UK's immigration, asylum and criminal systems in the wake of the July 2005 terrorist attacks in London. The authors discuss the multicultural nature of Britain's population and outline the challenges Western democracies face in maintaining open and inclusive societies, while also protecting members of their polity from extremist threats. They conclude that the proposed measures, such as deporting foreign-born radical preachers and de-naturalizing terrorist sympathizers, offer no long-term solution to the terrorist threat faced by Britain.

The Role of Islam in Europe: Multiple Crises?

This June 2006 report was published by the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels, Belgium. The report examines the role of political Islam in Europe society. The study mainly focuses on the role of Islam in France and points out three roles of Islam: Islam as a source of integration ("embourgeoisement"), Islam as a territory in which to retreat (a quiet "lieu derepli") and Islam as a vector of jihad.

La France Face à ses Musulmans - Émeutes, Jihadisme et Dépolitisation

This March 2006 report was published by the International Crisis Group in Brussels, Belgium. The authors analyze the riots in the French banlieues in autumn 2005. They discuss the roles of political Islam and Salafism, the social conditions, the politics of the French government and Muslim political representation. Finally, they offer recommendations not only for the militant immigrants, but also for the French government. Only available in French.

1.4 Media

Why Muslims must rise up now and join the battle against extremism, by the Times

In this article from 15 August 2006, the British Muslim Shahid Malik explains why Muslims must join the battle against extremism. He says that the freedom and lifestyle they enjoy in Britain cannot be matched in either the Muslim or non-Muslim world, but they do demand a price. Despite accusations of being a "sell-out", a barrage of hate mail and the compromising of his personal safety, he says that he still would support the government's anti-terror legislation.

The Many Faces of Islam, by the Time Magazine: Europe Edition

This website provides a selection of articles from the 16 December 2002 edition of Time magazine on different views about Islam and Europe from European Muslims.

A 'dangerous moment' for Europe and Islam, by the International Herald Tribune

This 7 February 2006 article analyzes the Mohammed cartoons published in Danish newspapers in September 2005 and their effect in Europe.

Under the Cover of Islam, by the New York Times

In this article of 18 November 2004 a Canadian Muslim gives her views about the European approach toward Islam. She considers the differences between the debate on Islam in Western Europe and in North America. According to the author, in Western Europe, the entry point for this

debate is the Muslim headscarf. By contrast, the entry point in North America is terrorism. The author concludes that this shows a different attitude toward religion: In contrary to the North American stance, for many Europeans religion remains an irrational force.

Europe's angry young Muslims, by the BBC

This three-part series from March 2006 highlights a new generation of alienated young Muslims in Europe , whose anger may turn to radicalism. In part one, the root causes of the 2005 London bombings and the Paris riots the same year are discussed. Part two asks whether the Netherlands renowned tolerance has failed when it comes to its Muslim population. In part three the reporter visits a reputed hub of Islamic radicalism.