

Muslims in Europe: An Introduction

Justin Vaisse, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow
Brookings Institution

This paper aims to briefly present the basic facts and issues about Muslims in Europe, from a political and sociological perspective, and to offer elements of comparison with the U.S. There will be a slight emphasis on France, due to the author's area of specialty—and to the fact that France is home to the largest number of Muslims in Europe.

A few popular myths about Islam in Europe should first be dispelled, in order to grasp the real issues and challenges:

Myth #1 – Being Muslim constitutes a fixed identity, sufficient to fully characterize a person. When it comes to Muslims, people wrongly assume that religion—rather than nationality, gender, social class, etc.—necessarily trumps other identities. To take just a few examples, the *Washington Post*, in a June 2008 article on migrations to the European Union (EU), writes about “Muslims arriving from the Middle East and Africa, and Eastern Europeans moving west”, even though a) not all of the migrants from this region are Muslims, b) “Eastern Europeans” would never be labeled “Orthodox” or “Catholics”, and c) that is not the issue anyway, since the article is about immigration. For a couple of weeks in November 2005, the media used the term “Muslims riots in France” to describe the wave of urban violence that resulted in burnt cars and property damage. But these riots had nothing to do with Islam, and everything to do with the social and

economic conditions of largely immigrant communities. Muslim groups who tried to play a mediating role discovered themselves to be irrelevant and powerless.

Myth #2 – Muslims in Europe are, in one way or the other, inherently foreign, the equivalent of visiting Middle-Easterners who are alien to the “native” culture. (European culture, however, has always included Muslim elements, as early as the 8th Century). The approximately 15 to 17 million persons of Muslim background in the EU-27 countries (population: 500 million) include both citizens and non-citizens of European member states, but a majority of them hold French, British, German, etc., nationality. Many of them are proud of this fact and would never think of themselves as anything else than Europeans (even while honoring their heritage). Indeed, there is more difference in political culture and social codes between a French Muslim and a German Muslim than there is between a French Muslim and a French of other religious orientation.

Myth #3 – Muslims in Europe form a “distinct, cohesive and bitter group,” in the words of a 2005 *Foreign Affairs* article. In reality, they are anything but a cohesive group. Not only is there no unity to be found at the European level, but when one looks at the national level, what predominates is the profound divisions, either between countries of reference and their specific culture and brand of Islam (e.g.,

Belgians of Turkish origin vs. Belgians of Moroccan origin), between visions of religion and affiliation (e.g., German Turks associated with Milli Görüs vs. those affiliated with Diyanet), or between social status, political views, ethnicity, etc. In other words, to speak of “a Muslim community” is simply misleading.

Myth #4 – Muslims are demographically gaining on the “native” population. The implicit assumption behind this very widespread myth is that Muslims form a distinct demographic bloc defined by religion, a bloc which will never blend into the rest of society (another possible assumption is based on ethnicity, “Muslims” being surrogate for “people of color” vs. white people). This assumption is contradicted by the significant rates of intermarriage and conversions (in both directions) and, more importantly, by the reality of integration in many countries, where Muslims are simply patriotic, law-abiding citizens—in this case, worries about demography have no basis, why would one count them apart? But even accepting that assumption of demographic blocs, “Muslims” are actually not significantly gaining on “natives.” True, European birthrates are generally low, and birthrates among immigrant groups are often high. But in the latter group, they actually fall rapidly after the arrival and among subsequent generations, as they tend to conform to the national norm. And in some countries like France or Ireland, general fertility rates are comparable to that observed in the U.S., around two children per woman. Last but not least, immigration to the EU is more and more tightly controlled. It is doubtful that from about 15-17 million in the 500 million EU-27 today (3 to 4 %), potential Muslims could number more than 6 % in the coming decades.

The European Patchwork

Although European Muslims share many common issues and challenges, a pan-European view is largely misleading. In Italy, the “immigrant character” of Islam has been stressed in the *Consulta Islamica* (the dialogue of

the State with Muslims which started in 2005), and Denmark has faced specific problems with a very recent settlement of Muslims. Countries like Spain, by contrast, where the *Comisión Islamica de España* defines Islam as one of the spiritual faiths rooted in Spanish history, or France—where the colonial past led to early exchanges and the construction of a grand mosque in central Paris as early as 1926—see Islam as part of their history.

The main differences between EU countries, by increasing order of importance, have to do with:

1. The institutions and political philosophy of each country, especially as they relate to religion, the proper role of minorities, and multiculturalism;
2. The country of origin, or country of reference (for the children and grandchildren of immigrants) of Muslims;
3. The history of Muslim presence, and its modalities (“guest workers”, refugees, immigrants, converts, etc.), as well as the links of each country with the past (colonial tradition or not);
4. The number of Muslims relative to the general population, and their geographical concentration.

Before offering a brief snapshot of major European countries, it should be noted that the EU (Brussels) level is not relevant to deal with this issue, as the status of religions remains of national competence. However, the regional or local level often plays a key role, some states (*Länder*) being, for example, very active in their integration policies (like Rhineland-Westphalia, where more than a third of all Muslims in Germany live), or some municipalities of the same country taking opposing approaches (Rotterdam is financing Islamic education in its public schools, while Utrecht opposes it).

France, with 5 million potential Muslims (8% of the population), originating from Algeria,

Morocco, and to a lesser extent Turkey, Tunisia and sub-Saharan Africa, is home to a third of EU Muslims. A strict separation of church and state (*laïcité*) was gained in 1905 after very painful tensions, which have been reactivated in the recent decades about Islam. The debates surrounding the headscarf issue and the 2004 law banning religious signs in public schools are a good example. The government has heavy-handedly helped set up a French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM in French) in 2003, which represents Muslims for exclusively religious matters—as the French Republican vision of citizenship bans the recognition of separate (minority) identities in the public sphere. Given the challenges, France has been mostly successful at religious and cultural integration, as well as monitoring and preventing radicalization (it has the strongest anti-terrorism apparatus), but it has largely failed at social and economic integration of migrants (and their children and grandchildren), whatever their faith, as the urban violence of November 2005, and more recent flares, attest.

Germany is in a very different situation. It is home to 3.3 million Muslims (4 % of the population), of which an overwhelming majority, at least 2.3 million, trace their origin to Turkey, including a large proportion who are still Turkish citizens. The proximity of Turkey, the “guest worker program” of the 1960s and early 1970s intended to provide a temporary surge of workers for German industry, and the ethno-cultural vision of German citizenship, combined to create a blocked situation up until the 1990s, as well as a dominance of Turkish religious authorities (the Ankara-based Diyanet, acting through its German branch the DITIB) on German Islam. The reform of 2000, granting citizenship to most of those born in Germany, and the launching of a consultation process, the *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK) in 2006, have eased things somewhat. But there is persistent debate over German identity. This finds expression within the programs of the conservative parties (CDU and CSU), and also in the DIK process itself, which often blurs the distinctions between religious, social and security issues.

While Islam is still not an officially established church (corporation) like others, it does enjoy some public privileges—such as religious education in public schools—in some of the states (*Länder*).

The United Kingdom is home to 1.5 to 2 million Muslims (around 3 % of the population), most of them originating in South Asia, especially Pakistan. After 9/11, and especially after 7/7 (the homegrown Islamist bombings of July 7, 2005), the UK has tended, along with the Netherlands, to veer away from a permissive multicultural environment, where even extremist preachers enjoyed extensive freedoms—“Londonistan”—to a set of policies stressing a common British identity and the need for the government to become more intrusive in Muslim education, the monitoring of mosques, etc. One of the results of the interventionist “Preventing Extremism Together” (PET) process launched after 7/7 has been the establishment of the MINAB (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board), which aims to standardize guidelines for mosques around the country on subjects like the hiring of imams, and the fight against extremism.

Italy is home to approximately 1 million Muslims (1.5 % of the population), and this presence is fairly new, coming mostly from Morocco and Albania—there is also a significant population of converts. After all, Italy was until the 1970s a country of emigration, not immigration. Islam in Italy came under the influence of outside governments (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Libya) until 2005, when the Berlusconi government launched the *Consulta Islamica*. There are still tensions within this consultative process that mixes an administrative agenda with social and political issues, and many, especially the *Lega Nord* (part of the current Berlusconi coalition) criticize the inclusion of some individuals. Moreover, only a limited number of *Consulta* participants have been invited to form a new Federation that would apply for an *Intesa*—a framework agreement between the Italian state and a given religion that grants the full rights of a recognized religious community.

The Netherlands is home to approximately 950,000 Muslims (almost 6 % of the population), for which two countries of origin or reference emerge, Turkey and Morocco. Holland is a country which, by virtue of its turbulent religious history, had elaborated a far-reaching multicultural model of tolerance for difference and relative autonomy among religious communities. The brutal Islamist murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, a 26-year-old second-generation migrant born in Amsterdam and holding both Moroccan and Dutch citizenship, came as a huge shock. This event intensified reconsideration of the virtues of the Dutch model and fostered a hostile attitude against Muslims in parts of the population. Starting in 2005, the government launched a plan to prevent radicalization, improve social and economic integration and promote “Dutch values.” It has also encouraged the training of imams in Amsterdam and Leiden universities. One bright spot is the significant number of elected officials of Muslim background in national government and the lower Chamber of Parliament.

Spain is home to approximately 800,000 Muslims (close to 2 % of the population), most of whom trace their recent or ancient roots to Morocco. While Muslims were expelled or forced to convert in 1492, freedom of religion was granted under Franco in 1968, and extended in 1980. Starting in 1992, the *Comisión Islámica de España* has negotiated with the government on many issues, like religious training in schools and the social status of imams, but progress has been slow, and there are lingering tensions with immigrant communities in Andalucía. The bombing of a Madrid commuter train, on March 11, 2004, was carried out by homegrown terrorists of Moroccan origin.

Muslims in Europe: Common Challenges

While problems and bad news naturally tend to dominate the news media, and while some processes in some countries are worrying, this should obscure neither the good news—such as the underreported growth of a middle class of

Muslim background, quite an achievement given the very poor origins of most of them—nor the limits of some of the news-grabbing problems.

If one considers the reaction to the caricatures of Prophet Muhammad published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005-2006, for example, it is easy to forget—among the violent demonstrations in countries like Syria, Libya, Iran or Nigeria, resulting in more than 100 deaths—that in EU countries, no violence happened. Some individuals and Muslim organizations (like UCOII in Italy or UOIF in France) reacted through legal channels, such as peaceful demonstrations—in very limited numbers—or lawsuits, based on the purported racism inherent to some cartoons (like the “bomb in Muhammad turban” one). In France, once again, the origin of occasional urban violence is never to be found in cultural—religious issues like the headscarf ban in public schools or the caricatures of Muhammad, but always in the death of one or more youngsters in an encounter with police forces in some specific neighborhoods.

Five types of issues and challenges can be distinguished:

1. Some have nothing to do with Islam, starting with the social conditions of immigrants, their children and grandchildren, some of whom are Muslims. It is not that they are necessarily poor—solid European welfare states make absolute poverty virtually impossible. But many are often relegated to far-away outskirts and bleak housing projects, and are offered fewer opportunities than populations of older European origin. In spite of governmental efforts in almost every country, discrimination against Blacks, Arabs, South Asians, etc. (whatever their religion) extract a very heavy toll on both social and economic integration and sense of belonging to the national community. In France, unemployment (which averages 7.2% nationally) can reach 40% among young men in some housing projects. In Germany, very few

Turks get higher education—fewer than 25,000 of 236,000 Turkish 18 to 25 years old living in Germany were enrolled in German universities in 2004-2005. Discrimination is also noticeable in political representation, where very few non-whites are elected officials.

2. Others have everything to do with Islam, as they pertain to the exercise of religion. With varying degrees of success (generally not much), EU governments have tried to facilitate the local training of imams, including in the national language; the construction of mosques, with both an interdiction of the use of public funds, the refusal of seeing outside governments intervene too much, and the urge to get Islam out of the “basements” where it was often practiced in the 1980s and 1990s; the regulation of ritual slaughtering of lambs for the Aid festivity, with accompanying hygiene issues; the hiring of imams as chaplains for the armed forces or for prisons, where many inmates are Muslims; the setting up of Muslim private schools; the creation of Muslim sections in cemeteries; the regulation of the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, where many European Muslims (as well as others) are the victims of consumer fraud. On these issues that are crucial to demonstrate that Islam is not a foreign entity, progress has been slow, in spite of the new state-Islam consultative bodies established in almost every country.
3. Some have partly to do with Islam, like incidents concerning social values, whether a request by a local Muslim association to arrange for women-only hours at the municipal swimming pool, the refusal by some students to follow biology classes, the refusal to remove a headscarf in the situations where it is forbidden in some countries (like for civil servants in direct contact with the public in France), an unwillingness by female patients to be

treated by male physicians in public hospitals, or honor crimes and domestic violence, forced marriages, etc. Some of these situations, especially among the latter, have more to do with specific regional cultures and traditions (from places like rural Anatolia or rural Morocco) among recent immigrants than with Islam, but there is still a clash with accepted social codes and, sometimes, the law of the land. Another issue partly related to Islam is the sense of belonging to the national community. While strong in some countries like France, in spite of discrimination, it is dangerously low in others like the UK, where more Muslims tend to emphasize the religious aspects of their identity. This estrangement is of course conducive, in some cases, to a more radical break-up with their country.

4. Terrorism is in a category of its own because of its dire challenge to public order. It does exist in relation with Islam, but radicalization concerns a tiny fraction of European Muslims, and it always occurs at the fringes of Muslim networks and mosques (except in the UK until recently), and not as an isolated outgrowth of some sort—which is precisely what makes it hard to monitor and fight. Indeed, there is as much in common between everyday Muslims and terrorists as there is between, say, a German social democrat (SPD) Member of Parliament and a terrorist from the Baader-Meinhof Red Army faction—both have socialism as a reference, but that is all there is. Contrary to a popular notion, European Muslims frequently and firmly condemn violent actions perpetrated in the name of Islam. EU countries have suffered a number of homegrown terrorist attacks of radical Islamist origins, and have been obliged to upgrade their anti-terrorism apparatus rapidly. It also has a different reading of terrorism in general than America has—one should remember

that there are more “regional” terrorists (from the Basque country, Corsica, etc.—but also far-left groups) in EU prisons than Islamist terrorists.

5. Finally, some challenges have to do with non-Muslim populations and their perceptions of Islam. On top of racial discrimination, there is a specific targeting of Islam (Islamophobia), which manifests itself in attacks on mosques and the desecration of Muslim graves. But apart from these extreme cases, there is a constant schizophrenia in Europe—between excessive requests of conformity and misplaced demonstrations of “tolerance” or “multiculturalism” when it comes to Islam—which borders on condescension. In the former category, some *Länder* have requested citizenship tests for naturalization that include adopting a list of ill-defined German “values” (about homosexuality, abortion, etc.) with which not even all Germans would agree. In the latter category, a German judge has cited the Qur’an in rejecting a German Muslim woman’s request for a fast-track divorce on the ground that her husband beat her; and the Archbishop of Canterbury recently suggested Sharia law might have some rel-

evance to the British legal system. Needless to say, such excesses make European Muslims cringe—they just want to be treated as any other citizen.

A Quick Comparison with America

The difference with America is easy to grasp. While most of the 2 to 3 million Muslims of America (close to 1% of the population), of which 77% are citizens, are first-generation immigrants, they enjoy much better social conditions than European Muslims, as they generally mirror the U.S. public in education and income, including at the highest end of the income scale. They are not concentrated in pockets of poverty and disaffection. They benefit from a powerful integration process, including a dynamic job market and a multicultural environment—even after expressions of racism and Islamophobia following 9/11. There has been little radicalization, and the few cells and plots which were uncovered demonstrated a lack of seriousness. One common point with European Muslims, however, is that they do not form a coherent group. While Black Muslims make up 20 to 30% of the total, almost 25% originate from the Arab world, about 20% from South Asia, and the rest from all parts of the world, including Europe.