Organized Islam in Western Europe: an attempt to categorize and assess influence

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This report seeks to provide a general overview of Muslim organizations in Western Europe. In doing so, it will first outline a framework to categorize the extremely diverse Muslim organizations active on the continent according to their religious and political views. It will then attempt to gauge their influence and impact on European Muslim populations. It must be noted that any analysis covering the entire continent is inevitably simplified and imprecise. Each country has its own history and peculiar Muslim presence, differing significantly from one another in size, origins, structures, socio-economic conditions and beliefs. The paper seeks to provide a general framework that can be adopted, with the necessary adaptations, for each reality.

A heterogeneous jungle

Even though small Muslim populations existed in some European countries already by the 19th century, a large-scale presence began to be seen only in the 1960s. The booming economies of Europe's most industrialized countries often filled their need for cheap, unskilled labor with immigrants from a variety of Muslim-majority countries linked through pre-existing colonial ties or labor agreements between governments. At the time both European governments and Muslim immigrants perceived this phenomenon as temporary, expecting the latter to return to their home countries after a few years.[1] For this reason Muslims remained, at the time, an invisible presence in Europe.[2]

The situation changed significantly in the 1970s. In the wake of the economic downturn triggered by the 1974 oil crisis, most European countries restricted immigration.[3] Yet even as regulations reduced the influx of new laborers, family reunification laws enacted throughout Europe allowed migrant workers to be joined by their spouses and children. Rather than returning to their home countries, the vast majority decided to settle permanently in Europe with their extended families. Since then, Europe's Muslim population has grown steadily. To the first wave of immigrants has been added a second and even a third generation of European-born Muslims, most of them citizens of their country of birth.[4] And, as large numbers of asylum seekers from various war-torn Muslim-majority countries have joined legal and illegal immigrants, the Muslim presence has expanded to areas of southern Europe where it had not previously reached. Today, virtually all European countries host a Muslim minority, and the best

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[1] Joel S. Fetzer and J. Christopher Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France and Germany* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Page 64.

[2] Jørgen Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. vii, 8-21, 24-7, 40-4.

[3] Joceline Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the Unites States* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 11-16.

[4] Citizenship laws differ significantly among European countries.

estimates put the number of Muslims living in Western Europe at between 15 and 20 million – making Islam the continent's second religion.[5]

The Muslim presence differs significantly from one country to another. In some countries Muslims tracing their origin to a certain region or country constitute a majority. That is the case, for example, of North Africans (Algerians in particular) in France, South Asians (Pakistanis in particular) in Great Britain, Turks in Germany and Moroccans in Spain. Yet, to be sure, in all these countries there are sizeable Muslim communities originating from other areas. In some other European countries, like Sweden or Italy, Muslim immigration is even more diverse, with no group constituting a majority.

But even among groups originating from the same country there are ethnic and sectarian differences of crucial importance. Immigrants from Turkey in all Western European countries are mostly Sunni but there are significant numbers of Alevites, a Shia minority sect. By the same token, Sunni Muslims originating from Turkey can be ethnic Turks or Kurds – a distinction with very important implications. Moreover, intermarriage among European Muslims and the presence of a sizeable number of converts (themselves of various ethnic and sectarian backgrounds) adds additional layers of diversity to Europe's Islam.

Moreover, aside from national origin, ethnic and sectarian divides, European Muslim communities are, like any others, characterized by important social, educational, and political differences. In substance, no bigger mistake could be made than to see the Muslim community of any European country as a monolithic block.[6] Indeed, many wonder if it would be more appropriate to speak of "Muslim communities" rather than a single Muslim community.[7]

These divisions are reflected in the high number of distinct organizations that Muslims living in Western Europe have created over the past few decades. In order to navigate this complex landscape, this report seeks to provide a general framework to categorize the myriad of Muslim organizations operating in Europe. And while ethnicity and national origin are important factors, this report aims to categorize European-based Muslim organizations based on their political and religious views. The criterion used to categorize organizations therefore is based on an organization's view as to the role Islam should have in public life. In substance, this report seeks to identify a continuum that sees on one hand extreme Islamist organizations – that is groups and networks that perceive Islam as a comprehensive system shaping all aspects of private and public life – and on the other secular groupings that proactively advocate the strict confinement of Islam to the private realm.

This system inevitably lends itself to arbitrariness and oversimplification. Organizations often change positions over time, reassessing some of their views and therefore moving along the continuum. Moreover, most of them are not monolithic, rather often internally divided on a

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[5] The exact number is highly debated and is virtually impossible to establish with certainty. 15 million is the number estimated by the 2004 U.S. Department of State International Religious Freedom Report, as well as by a 2005 study by the Pew Research Center entitled *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe*.

[6] Carolyn M. Warner and Manfred W. Wenner, "Religion and the Political Organization of Muslims in Europe," *Perspectives on Politics, September 2006, Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 457-479.*

[7] Jan Rath, Rinnus Pennix, Kees Groendendijk and Astrid Meyer, "The Politics of Recognizing Religious Diversity in Europe: Social Reactions to the Institutionalization of Islam in the Netherlands, Belgium and Great Britain," *Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences*, 35(1): 53-70; Lewis, page 52.

variety of issues. Furthermore, it is important to differentiate between religious and political views – although the line dividing the two is often a fine one. It is not uncommon to find organizations that embrace an extremely conservative interpretation of Islam but are not involved in any effort to introduce elements of it in public life. Finally, the discourse of various Muslim organizations on the role of Islam in public life changes significantly from country to country, also in response to each country's attitudes towards the role of religion.

From militant secularists to jihadists

On one extreme of the continuum there are "extreme secularists," European-based Muslims who are very critical of many positions within Muslim communities and, in some cases, within Islam itself. With some limited exceptions extreme secularists are not organized in permanent, well-functioning structures. Rather, they are public intellectuals, politicians, or activists of Muslim background who, by virtue of their positions and visibility, have been vocal in condemning conservatism, lack of self-criticism, unwillingness to integrate and other negative trends within European Muslim communities. Some of them have leveraged their criticism not just against Muslim communities and/or leaders but also against the religion itself and a handful, such as former Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali and current Italian EMP Magdi Allam, have even left Islam.

It is difficult to gauge the influence of these elements on Muslim communities. Most of them draw very vocal negative reactions from some European Muslims, but this does not necessarily provide an indication of their popularity, as the vocal reaction of a few should not be confused with the views of the majority – there might be a large cross section of the Muslim community that silently approves of their views. By the same token, it should be noted that most of these elements do not lead or belong to large, structured movements but, rather, operate as isolated individuals. Some of them are quite successful and have become leading public intellectuals (like Afshin Ellian in the Netherlands) or prominent politicians (like Naser Khader in Denmark) in their countries. But it is arguable that the roots of their success are to be found largely in the support they get from non-Muslims rather than parts of Muslim communities.

Moving further to the center of the continuum are non-religious organizations created by individuals of Muslim background. During the first phase of Muslim immigration, most organizations were established primarily on the basis of cultural and ethnic ties; religion was relegated to a secondary role. Workers' associations, cultural circles, and so-called *amicales* were founded – mainly by North African and Turkish immigrants – to provide services for their members and maintain the community's cultural traditions. Such organizations are, in a sense, called "Muslim" only descriptively: their members are Muslim, but their focus is not religious. Though the younger generations are less attracted to associations that are so closely bound to the countries of their parents' birth, these groups still represent an important fraction of Europe's Muslim organizations. Other groupings often focus on specific issues, such as women's rights or conditions in a particular neighborhood.

Moving further along on the spectrum to what is arguably its center we find "mainstream" religious organizations. Over the past twenty years the number of Islamic religious organizations has significantly increased, a development stimulated by several factors. In the Muslim world, the decline of nationalism, commonly dated to the early 1970s, coincided with a return to various forms of Islamic piety. In Europe, first-, second-, and third-generation Muslim

immigrants struggling to adjust to life in the West have also come to see Islam as providing cultural identity.

Religious organizations are even more diverse than their secular counterparts. A first important division is along sectarian lines. Most Muslims living in Europe are Sunni, but there are sizeable Shia communities in the United Kingdom and in Scandinavian countries. In several European countries there is a significant presence of Alevites (Germany, Austria) and Ahmadiya (Great Britain), two sects whose belonging to Islam is widely disputed. A second principle of differentiation, as important as the first in explaining the fragmentation of organized Islam in Europe, is ethnicity – or, more specifically, nationality. [8] Almost as strictly as secular associations, religious organizations tend to split along national lines rather than into the four main ethnic groups of Muslim immigrants (Arab, Turkic, Indo-Pakistani, and sub-Saharan African). Other ethnic groups, such as Kurds, Albanians, or Somalis, also generally have their own mosques and organizations. While divisions based on nation of origin and ethnicity are becoming less sharp as second and third generations of European-born Muslims are coming of age, they continue to exist and are a major obstacle to the creation of a unified Muslim leadership.

Yet, as said, sect and ethnicity are considered important but not primary factors shaping this report's categorization of Muslim organizations. According to this categorization, religious organizations that embrace a mainstream (notwithstanding the arbitrariness of the term) and apolitical interpretation of Islam occupy the position immediately to the right of secular organizations. While every case should be analyzed individually and there are important nuances to take into consideration, it is fair to state that the majority of Muslim organizations in Europe can be placed in this category. The average Muslim organization or mosque, in fact, does not actively promote Islamist or radical views.

That is not to say that the views of many of them are not very conservative and, on several key issues, controversial if not outright problematic for most Europeans. A traditionalist interpretation of Islam leads to positions on issues such as the role of women or religious freedom (particularly, the ability to leave Islam) that most Europeans would consider quite radical and/or backwards. This issue should not be dismissed and deserves a larger debate but is not the aim of this report. For the sake of the report, the center of the continuum of European Muslim organizations is occupied by the large numbers of organizations that embrace a conservative interpretation of Islam – again, with important differences among them – but do not actively push for the introduction of Islamic customs or law in the public space.

While many organizations and trends belong to this large sub-category, an important component is so-called "Embassy Islam." "Embassy Islam" is the term often used to describe the networks established by the governments of a handful of Muslim countries that have seen millions of their citizens migrate to Europe. Eager for political, financial, and security reasons to maintain control over their expatriate communities, the governments of Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, and, to a lesser extent, Tunisia and Egypt, have created institutions to serve the cultural, educational, and religious needs of their citizens living in Europe.

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[8] Warner and Wenner, op cit, idem.

Conceived (and perceived) as the *longae manus* of their governments, such institutions generally preach what is widely considered to be a moderate interpretation of Islam and attempt to reinforce the believers' links to their homeland. Particularly extensive is the network established in Europe by the Turkish state, whose Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, commonly referred to as *Diyanet*) runs hundreds of mosques and has more than 1,200 imams in all Western European countries with a sizable Turkish immigrant community.[9] Organizations created or supported by Muslim governments have worked with European governments for decades. Several European governments, for example, have concluded agreements with the Turkish *Diyanet* and organizational outgrowths of various North African governments, allowing their employees to run mosques or teach Islam to Muslim pupils in public schools.

Moving rightwards from the middle of the continuum one can find organizations and movements that are increasingly conservative in their outlook, yet not Islamist. It goes without saying that the distinction is sometimes feeble and highly debatable, leaving large grey areas. Barelwis, for example, are a conservative Muslim strain of Islam originating in South Asia that is widely popular among British Muslims. Are Barelwis Islamists? Arguably not, as they do not actively participate in political activities aimed at introducing an Islamic political order (although this statement is also somewhat debatable). Yet on many issues their positions are identical – if not, in some cases, more conservative – to those of many Islamists. The lines along this and most sections of the continuum are inevitably blurred.

Finally, Islamist organizations occupy the leftmost section of the continuum. This paper will not expand on the history, nature, aims and methods of Islamist organizations in Europe, as that task was fulfilled in a previous paper. It suffices to say that, as it is intuitive, participationists sit on the leftmost part of the section of the continuum allotted to Islamists and violent rejectionists on the rightmost section of the whole continuum.

European Muslims' religiosity

The dynamics of the relationships among the many European Muslim organizations are complex, ranging from occasional cooperation to outright confrontation, though competition is the normal state of affairs. Europe is a new religious market for Islam, and organizations vie for influence both within the Muslim community and within European establishments. This panorama is ever-changing, as the importance and visibility of the organizations rise and fall, reflecting not necessarily the numbers of their adherents but rather the means they possess.

Yet many indications point to the fact that this competition often takes place within a small niche, virtually ignored by the majority of European Muslims. Indeed, the vast majority of European Muslims are connected with no organization. Separate studies conducted in several countries have consistently found that no more than 10-12% of Muslims are actively engaged in or even belong to a Muslim organization, indicating the presence of a silent majority who do not feel represented by any of the competing organizations.[10] A 2007 survey conducted in Denmark,

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[9] Ali Bardakoglu, "'Moderate Perception of Islam' and the Turkish Model of the Diyanet: The President's Statement," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, October 2004, Vol. 24, No. 2.

[10] Brigitte Marechal, "The Question of Belonging," in Brigitte Marechal, Stefano Allievi, Felice Dassetto and Jørgen Nielsen, eds., *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), page 100; Bernard Godard and Sylvie

for example, showed that only 5% of Danish Muslims went to a mosque or spoke with an imam at least once a month, and half seldom or never participated in religious ceremonies.[11] A 2008 survey of young Dutch Muslims of Moroccan descent revealed that 72% rarely or never visited a mosque.[12]

Moreover, while exact numbers and percentages cannot be determined, studies suggest that most European Muslims can be categorized as "cultural" or "sociological" Muslims.[13] Sociological Muslims interpret their faith much as do most contemporary Europeans: they view their religious affiliation as purely cultural, a family tradition and a source of identity, but not as the center of their lives. Some might be agnostics; others could be indifferent to religion or simply accept that Islam shapes some rites of passage (such as marriage) without exerting a general influence on their life.

But many religious and practicing Muslims, too, remain independent of organizations. Many European Muslims, particularly among second and third generation, have shaped new individualized ways of living their faith; these hybrid forms often merge traditional elements of Islam with aspects of Western life and are completely independent of any structure.[14] Others practice more orthodox forms of Islam and might regularly frequent a mosque of their choosing, but they do not recognize themselves in any of the Muslim organizations operating in Europe.

Assessing representativeness

Because of the community's internal fragmentation and the widespread reluctance of individuals to affiliate, no organization operating in Western Europe has succeeded in attracting anything close to a majority of Muslims. It is therefore very difficult to assess the popularity of each organization or to determine what percentage of European Muslims in each country should be placed on what part of the above-mentioned continuum. This report will suggest three approaches that might provide at least some clues to the popularity of various Muslim organizations: governmental outreach approaches, voting patterns and popularity of ideas.

Governmental outreach approaches

In substance, the first approach looks at how various European governments have reached out to their local Muslim communities when seeking to form representative bodies. This approach assumes that governments are the entities best positioned to assess the dynamics within Muslim communities in their territories and that therefore the weight they have attributed to the various Muslim organizations somewhat reflects their actual standing in the community.

In reality this approach has severe limitations. European governments, particularly in the past, were quite unaware of the internal dynamics within Muslim communities and often limited their outreach to the loudest and best organized forces, the "lowest hanging fruits," while

Taussig, *Les Musulmans en France*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), page 35. [Why is there a line of space between this footnote and the next?]

[11] Kirsten Nilsson, "Imamers indflydelse er begrænset," *Politiken*, March 12, 2007.

[12] "**Marokkaanse jongeren willen soepeler geloof," *EenVandaag*, September 29, 2008.**

[13] Marechal, op cit, pp. 9-10.

[14] Jocelyne Cesari, "Islam in France: The Shaping of a Religious Minority," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 41-2.

ignoring other forces that might have had a significant following in the community but were not as vocal and politically savvy as others. Moreover, there are circumstances in which governments have purposely excluded certain forces from outreach initiatives for political reasons or because they deemed them unsuited partners for such efforts despite the fact that they did represent a significant cross section of the local Muslim community.

Despite these important limitations, it is important to see how governments have engaged Muslim communities, as it provides clues to both dynamics within European Muslim communities, and European policymaking and attitudes towards Islam. The task of finding interlocutors within Europe's Muslim communities has been excruciatingly difficult. Many governments have found themselves dealing with a vast array of organizations fighting to become the anointed representatives of the Muslim community and unwilling to cooperate with their competitors. Which of the many Muslim organizations should sit at the table with the government to negotiate issues such as regulating the slaughter of animals according to the *halal* method or drafting legislation to allow Muslims not to work on Friday? Which should be asked to partner with the government to draft programs to teach Islam in public schools or to train imams? As one commentator stated, "When government officials look for a responsible interlocutor, they find that the Muslim voice is a cacophony rather than a chorus."[15]

The lack of unified leadership of European Muslim communities has significantly hampered the process of governance of Islam in the many countries whose constitutions require that a religious group be recognized by the state in order to enjoy a variety of rights and benefits. The process of recognition has been fairly straightforward in those few European countries that, for historical reasons, have a well-established Muslim minority. For example, in some Eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria and Romania, a mufti represents both political and spiritual authority. Even though the mufti's leadership may be (and often is) challenged by competing forces inside the Muslim community, the institutional structure establishes a formal point of contact for the Bulgarian and Romanian governments. In Greece, the status of the Muslim community was set out in the 1923 Lausanne Peace Treaty with Turkey. The arrangement was well suited for dealings with the sizable Turkish Muslim minority of Thrace, but has become increasingly inadequate to manage the state's relationship with the new Greek Muslim community, which is composed largely of immigrants.[16] More recently, Austria, Spain, and Belgium have enacted legislations that identify a representative body to serve as the Muslim community's official interlocutor with the state. Though the day-to-day implementation of such measures has not always gone smoothly, they represent the most advanced approaches to institutionalizing Islam; most European countries have not moved beyond debate and experimentation.

Some countries, such as Sweden, for example, have selected one Muslim organization as their exclusive partner for virtually all initiatives – an approach it has now abandoned. Similarly, to compensate for the lack of unified leadership in its Muslim community, Great Britain provided political and financial support to a group of hand-picked Muslim leaders which were supposed to be, according to Whitehall's plans, the middlemen between the government and the

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[15] Jytte Klausen, *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), page 81.

[16] Yorgos Christidis, "The Muslim Minority in Greece," in Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock, and Bogdan Szajkowski, eds., *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*. (Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 1996).

British Muslim population. The British government has recently reversed its support for the Muslim Council of Britain, after it realized that the organization, dominated by affiliates of various participationist Islamist organizations, proved unreliable and did not deliver on any of its promises. In contrast, France and Italy have decided to form representative bodies (elected with a controversial formula based on mosques' square meters in France, government-appointed in Italy) to serve as official partners of the governments.

An analysis of the policy adopted by each country, looking particularly at which organizations are engaged as representative of the Muslim community, can, despite the above-mentioned caveats, provide some glimpse into the presumed influence of various Muslim organizations within each European country. It should be noted that the two types of organizations that in most countries compete for the status of main government interlocutors are those backed by Muslim-majority governments of their countries of origin and those linked to participationist Islamist movements. Neither has the general support that would even remotely qualify them to serve as sole representatives of the larger Muslim community; yet they alone have the organizational apparatus and control over a network of mosques that give them at least the appearance of possessing a nationwide following in most European countries. Other organizations, in fact, tend to be small, underfunded and operate only at the local level; they are therefore often unable to compete with the more sophisticated structures created by "Embassy Islam" and participationist Islamist movements.

The example of Switzerland

Several of the dynamics so far described can be observed (with the obvious peculiarities each country possesses) in Switzerland. The presence of a sizeable Muslim population in Swiss territory began in the 1960s, when economic migrants arrived in Switzerland to work in low-skilled jobs. The number of Muslims living in the country has increased progressively over the last fifty years due to more immigration, the birth of the children of the immigrants of the previous decades and the arrival of thousands of asylum seekers from various parts of the world. As a result of these flows the national census of 2000 counted 310,807 Muslims living in Switzerland, roughly 4.3% of the total population. Authorities estimated in 2013 that that number is now between 340,000 and 400,000, about 5% of the population.[17]

The Swiss Muslim community is characterized by a high level of diversity. About 60% of Swiss Muslims trace their origins to an array of South Eastern European countries (Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo). Some 20% have their roots in Turkey.[18] Muslims from the Middle East, South Asia, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa comprise little more than 10%. While there are mosques and organizations that cater to all Muslims, the majority of Swiss Muslims frequent places of worship and organizations that are highly divided along ethnic and linguistic lines. A 2013 Swiss government report correctly argues that rather than a Muslim

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[17] *Dialogue avec la Population Musulmane 2010*, report by the Federal Department of Justice and Police (DFJP), Bern, May 2011, page 29. Available at: http://www.bfm.admin.ch/content/dam/data/migration/berichte/ber-muslimdialog-2010-f.pdf (accessed June 23, 2013).
[18] Ibid.

"community", it is more correct to speak of Muslim "communities," as Muslims living in Switzerland tend to come together based on their language and ethnic origin.[19]

It is important to note that, despite common perceptions, most Swiss Muslims relate to their faith in ways quite similar to members of the country's other religions. A 2005 study for the Federal Commission for Foreigners tellingly showed that only 10-15% of Swiss Muslims practice their faith actively and only 11% attend religious services on a weekly basis – numbers similar to Christians.[20] In a 2013 government report Swiss authorities argue that of the almost 400.000 Muslims living in Switzerland, only 50.000 are practicing and only 25.000 belong to Muslim organizations. Only a few thousand embrace Islamist ideas and only a few dozen are "jihadists."[21] Levels of religiosity vary from community to community, with Arabs reporting significantly higher levels than other groups.

There are some 350 Islamic organizations controlling mosques – only a handful of which are purpose-built – and several informal prayer rooms throughout the country.[22] Most mosques and Islamic centers seek to function not just as places of worship but also as centers of social interaction. Most Islamic organizations are small and operate at the local level, but in most large and mid-size cities and in several cantons there are umbrella organizations seeking to bring together all or most of the area's entities.[23]

A handful of organizations, such as the League of Muslims of Switzerland (Ligue des Musulmans de Suisse, LMS) and the Islamic Central Council of Switzerland (Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz, IZRS), and umbrella organizations, such as the COIS (Coordination des organisations islamiques de Suisse) and FOIS (Fédération des organisations islamiques de Suisse), seek to represent the Swiss Muslim community at the national level. Their claim is generally accepted neither by Swiss authorities nor by the majority of Swiss Muslims.

Fully aware of these dynamics, when in 2010 it sought to start a dialogue with the Muslim communities, the Swiss government invited 19 individuals who represented the broad spectrum of Swiss Islam. Of the 18 individuals (one of the original invitees refused to participate as he is an Alevi and therefore did not consider himself a Muslim) that make up the official body formed by the Swiss government, some belong to the large umbrella organizations like COIS or FOIS.[24] But many are just individuals who, by virtue of their ethnic origin, sex and political/religious views, are deemed to represent large cross sections of the Swiss Muslim population that are not represented by the established Swiss Muslim organizations. In substance, the Swiss government decided that if it limited its invitations to representatives of organized groupings it would have engaged only "the usual suspects" and would have neglected important

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[19] *Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse, eu égard en particulier à leurs relations plurielles avec les autorités étatiques, en réponse aux postulats 09.4027 Amacker-Amann du 30 novembre 2009, 09.4037 Leuenberger du 2 décembre 2009 et 10.318 Malama du 1er mars 2010*, page 22. Available at http://www.ejpd.admin.ch/content/dam/data/pressemitteilung/2013/2013-05-08/ber-f.pdf, accessed May 15, 2013.

[20] *Vie Musulmane en Suisse: Profils Identitaires, Demandes et Perceptions des Musulmans en Suisse*, study by the Groupe de Recherche sur l'Islam en Suisse for the Commission Fédérale des Étrangers, 2005.

[21] *Rapport du Conseil fédéral sur la situation des musulmans en Suisse,* ibid, pp. 64-5. -

[22] Ibid [and same pages as footnote 21 ?]

[23] Stephane Lathion, "Muslims in Switzerland: Is Citizenship Really Incompatible with Muslim Identity?", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 28, No. 1, April 2008, page 55.

[24] *Dialogue avec la Population Musulmane 2010*, op cit, page 5.

cross sections. It therefore proactively sought individuals who, while unaffiliated, could potentially represent relevant cross sections of the Swiss Muslim population.

Interestingly, the Swiss government decided not to include in its outreach effort the leadership of the Islamischer Zentralrat Schweiz (IZRS). Founded in 2009, the IZRS has gained a high profile due to its activism. It can count on some 2,000 fee-paying members and a core leadership of highly educated Swiss-born activists. Its media department issues regular press releases in various languages and its website and Facebook page are professionally designed and constantly updated. Its activists regularly run standpoints throughout the country (although mainly in German-speaking areas, where the group is more established) distributing books and pamphlets. Its annual conference is the largest event for Muslims in the country, attracting prominent speakers from all over the world and a few thousand attendees. Yet, despite these facts, the Swiss government has decided not to invite members of the IZRS to its dialogue initiative, arguing that it is not well rooted in the community and, most importantly, that its leaders espouse radical views. The IZRS, in fact, is seen as heavily influenced by Salafist ideology (albeit in its non-violent forms) and its views are deemed incompatible with Swiss values.

The Swiss example highlights various dynamics common to virtually all European countries, from the extreme fragmentation of the local Muslim community to that of its organizational structures; from the difficulty of creating an artificial body supposed to include all trends within any given country's expression of Islam (including non-religious segments and individuals) to the challenge of including Islamist organizations in such outreach initiatives.

Voting patterns

As stated in this and the previous report, participationist Islamist organizations possess a remarkable ability to "punch above their weight" and be seen as spokesmen for European Muslim communities. The dynamic is obviously troubling on several levels. Yet, perhaps some indications that participationist Islamist organizations, despite their claims, have only limited leverage within European Muslim communities come from two political patterns witnessed throughout Europe. The first has to do with Muslim parties. Over the past 20 years there have been various attempts in several European countries to create political parties that, although in very different ways from one another, have sought to present themselves as "Muslim parties" and obtain the votes of the Muslim population in local or national elections. All these efforts have been little more than the improvised and poorly organized attempts of isolated individuals or small groupings which, with no exceptions, have completely failed to achieve any success and, in many cases, were dissolved after a few years.

It is noteworthy that the participationist Islamist organizations have not been involved in any of these efforts. It can be argued that participationist Islamist organizations, despite their public claims, know full well that they too would fail to attract widespread support and see the creation of their own political party as a trap that would call their bluff. An electoral fiasco, in fact, would provide the evidence of their lack of real traction in the community, severely undermining their representation bid with European elites. Fully understanding that forming their own party would be premature and unravel their claims, participationist Islamist organizations have instead chosen to work within existing political structures, directly and indirectly influencing established political parties.

Another phenomenon potentially highlighting the limited political impact on European Muslims of participationist Islamist organizations is the absence of Islamists among European Muslim members of parliament. In most European countries, in fact, small but steadily increasing numbers of politicians of Muslim background have gained seats in national parliaments. It is remarkable that throughout the continent, virtually none of them is affiliated with participationist Islamist organizations or can be considered even ideologically close to Islamism. Some of them have actually made anti-Islamism their main personal and political battle (this is the case, for example, with former Danish MP Naser Khader and former Italian MP Souad Sbai), but most others can similarly be considered foreign to Islamist ideology. While it is true that these politicians might be able to rely on many votes coming from non-Muslims, the lack of elected Islamist parliamentarians in Europe is perhaps another sign that the participationist Islamist organizations' claim of leadership is largely overblown.

Yet if it is at least unclear whether participationist Islamist organizations can actually direct the Muslim vote towards a candidate of their choosing, what is unquestionable is that they can severely damage the standing in the community of politicians and other public figures by accusing them of anti-Muslim sentiments and, more specifically, of Islamophobia. It is not uncommon, in fact, for participationist Islamist organizations to accuse not just those who unquestionably have racist views, or those who criticize Islam, of racism and Islamophobia, but also those who criticize participationist Islamist organizations or refuse to work with them. Thanks to their remarkable propaganda machine, participationist Islamist organizations are capable of spreading these accusations well beyond the limited circle of their affiliates, turning them into rumors with much broader circulation. Although participationist Islamist organizations might not be able to direct Muslim voters towards one candidate or one party, it is arguable that they are capable of tarnishing the reputation of politicians who oppose them, regardless of the veracity of the charges, and consequently severely damaging the chances of obtaining votes within the Muslim community.

Popularity of ideas

While governmental outreach approaches and voting patterns are, despite their enormous intrinsic flaws, somewhat objective standards to assess the popularity and influence of European Muslim organizations, the third – popularity of ideas – is largely intangible. As seen, very few European Muslims are actively involved in Muslim organizations. But one way of potentially assessing what section of the continuum on which to place them is basing such assessment simply on their views. In substance, do some Muslim organizations exert an influence well beyond their immediate membership base, potentially having spread their views due to effective outreach and dissemination efforts?

The case that obviously comes to mind is, once again, that of participationist Islamist organizations, which have had enormous success in exerting their power on Muslim communities not through direct membership, which is generally quite limited, but through a diffuse cultural hegemony. Not all attendees of participationist Islamist organizations' conferences will embrace their views, but some will. And there are no other Islamic organizations that have the means to organize events even remotely on the scale of participationist Islamist organizations. If a young Muslim or a potential convert aims at knowing more about Islam, he or she is more likely to have easy access to participationist Islamist publications (notably from the European Brotherhood affiliated organizations) than to those of

any other Islamic group. While their membership has remained fairly small, participationist Islamist organizations have shown an enormous ability to monopolize the Islamic discourse, making their interpretation of Islam perhaps not yet mainstream but at least the most readily available, and putting their ideological stamp on any Islam-related issue, be it strictly religious or more properly political. Concepts and positions introduced by participationist Islamist organizations have been absorbed, often almost subconsciously, by large segments of European Muslim populations, irrespective of their religious and political views.

This dynamic is somewhat visible in various polls taken throughout Europe. If it is true that only a minority is actively involved in Islamist or religiously conservative organizations (as seen, 10-15%), much larger numbers embrace ideas that are typical of the right-most segments of the continuum. And tellingly, the percentages of young European Muslims that embrace such views tend to be higher than those of older European Muslims. According to a poll conducted among British Muslims in 2007, for example, 36% of 16 to 24-year-olds believe that if a Muslim converts to another religion he/she should be punished by death, compared with 19% of over-55s. Moreover, 37% of 16 to 24-year-olds prefer Islamic law over British law compared with 17% of over-55s, and 74% of 16 to 24-year-olds would prefer Muslim women to choose to wear the veil, compared with only 28% of over-55s.[25]

It is obviously extremely difficult, if not outright impossible, to establish a direct correlation between the work of various Islamist or conservative organizations and the increasing popularity of these views. It is not uncommon for individuals who believe that sharia is the best source of law or that the veil should be worn by all women to, at the same time, live a quite un-Islamic lifestyle. But it is an important fact that even these individuals, while not embracing the full plethora of Islamist believes, have absorbed parts of it.

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[25] "British Muslims poll: Key points," *BBC*, January 29, 2007.