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Islam in the European Union: what's at stake in the future?

Executive Summary

The reality of European Islam is very diverse. The differences are related to national, cultural, religious and linguistic elements; they **definitely remain important**. On the one hand, the ethnic frame of reference remains quite significant, or is on the way to becoming so. And the many distinctions between groups of European Muslims continue to matter even at the level of mosques, and associations in Europe. On the other hand, even the second and third generation of Muslims in Europe have not produced many trans-national Muslims.

Nowadays, discussions of European Islam may in fact refer to very diverse elements.

Formerly, there were a certain number of common historical viewpoints taken up in a European context as regards the presence of Muslims. At first, this presence was an unexpected novelty. Later, after the colonial experience had played out further, and after the tendency to see the Muslim dimension only as a generic cultural frame of reference had proven inadequate, European perspectives towards this Muslim presence changed so that the religious dimension was eventually taken into consideration.

Muslims became increasingly visible upon the continent, and this phenomenon followed quite a similar rhythm across Europe.

Some common problems were confronted and discussed by Muslims. At a stroke, problems related to Muslims moved from the complex of social and cultural issues alone, into the realm of political and philosophical issues. On a global European scale, Muslims strive to get a legal status comparable to that given to other recognised religions. And there are facing quite many cases of unfriendly attitudes. Above all there is uneasiness, which is often expressed as a fear of the radicalization of European Islam.

At the level of faith, contrary to an assumption made by many about Muslims, including many Muslims concerning themselves, not all Muslims practice Islam in the same way, and not all Muslims have the same subjective experience of it. **Only about a third out of 15 million Muslims have, so to speak, made their self-reference to the Islamic faith active.** In the current state of affairs nothing allows us to say that this portion will or will not become larger. It is certain that the popular desire for Islamic religion has remained strong, and has indeed grown stronger during the last thirty years, but it is not at all certain that this will continue.

It is also important to acknowledge that the Muslim presence in Europe is an uneven and unfinished process. It is an ongoing process in the manner of all social facts. The internal articulation of European Islam is unfinished, leaders are rare, the leadership class is in the process of being constituted, the populations are still in the process of taking full possession of (their rights in) European public space, with many still rendered fragile because of the difficulty and precariousness of their entry into the space of the labour market.

Among others, two different dimensions of this Muslim presence were more especially taken into account and emphasised in the present report dealing with the integration of Islam in Europe. One focuses on diverse facets of the legal integration of Islam within European national realities. Another focus involves questions about the internal leadership of the Muslim communities and its fundamental role – and how this is to be implemented through long-term education.

1. The question of legal integration

Islam is undergoing a transformation process from an immigrants' religion into a religion that by full right is part of the European reality. **This process should be accompanied, in legal terms, by appropriate actions that will allow Muslim communities to fully integrate themselves into the European model of relations between States and religions.**

Although there is no single model of relations between States and religions in the European Union, three common principles – religious freedom, autonomy of religious communities, and cooperation between State and religious communities – recur in all Member States and constitute the hub around which they revolve. Islam can therefore find its own place within the different national systems of relations between States and religion, provided it respects that common core.

The establishment of Muslim organizations operating on a national scale, in a position to represent the Muslim communities settled in a State, is a preliminary condition for such a process. In most European countries, the legal regulation of religious communities is established on a national scale, and failing sufficiently representative organizations, the Muslim communities would be condemned to remain on the fringe of the relation system between States and religious groups. Bearing in mind this urgency, it is however advisable to proceed pragmatically and adapt strategies to the situation of each different country. The need to relate with a national Muslim counterpart may be met in different ways, on the basis of the laws applied in each State.

Giving Islam a sound legal status in the EU countries means addressing a number of delicate issues raised by the Muslim presence in Europe. Many of them do not pose new or particularly difficult legal problems. Questions like the building of mosques, religious assistance in prisons, hospitals and in military service can be solved by applying well-established rules which already apply to other religious communities.

In some other cases (ritual slaughtering, religious holidays, availability of separate sections in cemeteries, supply of religiously admitted food in the canteens of schools, prisons, etc.), **a little more caution is required: enlarging the area of exceptions to affect the general law is always a delicate matter and requires a careful analysis in which general interest and particular needs should be balanced. But EU Member States do not lack guidelines, which derive from their experiences with other religious communities on the same issues.**

There are other areas where a complete levelling of the Muslim community with the other religions characterized by a longer presence in Europe, will take longer. Teaching of Islam in State schools is an example, while questions connected with personal status and family law could provide other instances. In these sectors, the experimentation and research phase has not yet come to an end. It is thus advisable to encourage attempts that are being made in some European countries in order to have a pool of knowledge and experiences that will facilitate taking more considered decisions.

Analysis of the problems raised by the presence of Muslim communities in Europe does not confirm the assumption that Islam is incompatible with democracy and the secular State. On the grounds of the experience matured with other religions, the **European legal system of relations between States and religions already has available the necessary instruments to deal with and solve the problems raised by the presence of Muslim communities in Europe.**

The fact that the challenges posed by Muslims' presence in Europe may be met without breaking up European legal systems does not mean these systems are not bound to change under the pressure of Islamic demands. The adjustment is not an easy task, because it alters a long-standing balance of rights and privileges allotted to different religious communities: but it definitely remains within the boundaries of a physiological transformation process.

2. Beyond organizational forms, the major and urgent question of education and intellectual leadership

There is a whole range of currents of thought within Islam, and each current has its own sensibility. These currents are associated with organizations that have come out of the ancient and modern history of Islam. Most of the time, the activity of the members of such organizations gave rise to the establishment of a string of mosques and prayer rooms in Europe.

Beyond the past importance of creating places of worship, this **organizational picture is nowadays changing**: many other organizations have already been started up, tailored to the European space and able to display independence from Muslim countries, especially as regards their source of funds. Some youth movements take on a supple appearance, almost a la carte, and aim above all at the production of the meaningful and the moral.

But yet another step is still nowadays to be taken if the integration of Islam in Europe is to succeed: Muslims should succeed at creating higher institutions of education. Why? Because it is likely that **the greatest challenge in the future will be the constitution of an intellectual elite, capable of its own autonomous, original intellectual production**, to be established upon the experience of European Muslims in dialogue with the reality of European societies and their cultural and philosophical foundations.

It is likely that the harmonious development of Islam in Europe will depend, from now on, less upon institutional or organizational development than upon the development of intellectual dynamism, upon socio-cultural creations and interactions.

Indeed, the Muslim communities in Europe should be able to express intellectual and normative elaborations, adopting a European perspective able to deal with contemporary times and, above all, contemporary problems being faced by Islamic thought. This is nowadays **a basic requirement in order to acquire a higher profile in public places for Islam**. Is it also the only way to meet contemporary Muslims and non-Muslims' expectations.

And this requirement should be fulfilled through the appearance of new leaders, since **there now exists a shortage of trained leaders being produced in European space** and this situation is likely to worsen in the future.

As a matter of fact, contrasting tendencies are in operation: the younger generations that have grown up in Europe and have been educated there do not necessarily and gradually take responsibility for the community. For several reasons, **European Islam continues to be affected by the dynamics that exist in terms of world Islam, even if they are carried forward by actors who were born in European territory.** To explain that situation, we can mention the arrival, through marriage, of Muslim leaders trained in Muslim countries at the forefront of Islam. We also point to the return of members of the second generation of immigrants who studied Islamic sciences in Muslim countries since there was no place to carry out those studies in Europe. They too are also returning with Islamic baggage not always easily adaptable to the context in which they find themselves. In that case, world Islam is not only imported, but is carried forward by actors who were born in European territory.

Thus, one of the top priorities in the future is the creation of institutions of higher training and education in Europe. If Muslims do not succeed in doing so on a short or middle term basis, it should be useful to consider possibilities to promote a strategy of development.

In the long term, the question of appropriate scholarship, leading to the constitution of a Muslim leadership, is also linked to the **question of the fight against terrorism**. The establishment of an appropriate education is the only means capable of diffusing **counter-arguments proposing alternatives to the literalist schools** that have dominated the scene since the 1970's. Of course, that particular aspect of the struggle against Islamic terrorism would also require continued focus on security (through dismantling networks and sources of the professionalization) and socioeconomic promotion which aims at reducing the level of relative deprivation. It would also require consideration of a profound crisis in masculine identity (connected with the desire to preserve those values that are emblematic of patriarchal society), with an eye toward promoting better self-regulation in the community.

There are already a number of initiatives in Europe as regards providing opportunities for higher education, but there is **no stable model** for the kind of programme that might constitute a reference point at this time. There is important work toward convergence left to do.

In conclusion, a dynamic of change has to be set in motion. In this process, it is important:

- **To take the Muslim dimension into consideration in any reflection upon a European identity** (as much in respect of the state of things at present as in respect of the question of the rootedness of identity in the past).
- **To find an equilibrium** between principles of equity and innovation in the political management of the reality of European Islam (meaning **equity with regard to the Muslim faithful in relation to the faithful of other religions**); the desire for integration in general must involve the integration of Muslims into European space, and also the education of non-Muslim European citizens as regards Muslim reality. **For all citizens of the European Union**, there should be an emphasis on **education about citizenship and democratic foundations** (which are often taken for granted) and a pluridisciplinary investigation concerning the place of the religious dimension in public space.

- **To avoid reducing questions about European Islam that arises to stock patterns of encounter and dialogue between religions.**
- **To avoid getting stuck in situations that are, on the institutional level, responses to current expectations**, expectations that may not yet have stabilized. Here, we need to be aware that some Muslim organisations consider themselves as the representatives of European Muslims and attempt to function, sometimes improperly, as their spokespersons. In this context, **it is important to find out what the expectations of the great silent majority are**, as these are sometimes situated quite far from the concerns of their “representatives”.
- **To promote, with great caution and prudence, the development of tolerant and open Islam** through activities of elaboration and circulation of ideas (translations and communication).
- **To promote profound debates which do not hesitate to evoke themes that may make people angry.** They must be conducted in a spirit of openness and freedom to speak, without limitation, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, reciprocity, and “reciprocal co-inclusion”. It is a question of going beyond a relatively passive cohabitation in order to reinvent and render actively operational the promotion of interculturalism in the city, now often confined to expressive forms, cultural forms, or even the folkloric.

It is only by facing reality and emphasizing positive processes that the clash of civilisations, that has nothing to do with destiny, may be avoided.