



Muslim Immigration and the West

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The arrival of Muslims in the West in any sizable numbers is a very recent and rapid development. The mosque in Woking, not far from London, is the only one in Britain which has celebrated its centenary. In the early 1950s, the Muslim population of Britain was 23,000. Between 1961 and the present, this rose from 82,000 to over one million.

Sweden went from having virtually no Muslims in 1950 to 200,000 today. Starting from almost nil in the 1960s, in Belgium and the Netherlands there are today respectively 260,000 and 450,000, with about 500 mosques altogether. The Muslim presence in Germany began in 1961 and Turks numbering some 1.9 million now form over three-quarters of the Muslims there.

France had incorporated Algeria into the legal definition of the French nation, and Algerians began to settle in France in the early part of the century. Today there are over four million Muslims living there from all the Maghreb countries.

In the last 30 years an estimated five million Muslims have immigrated to the United States, half a million to Australia, about

the same number to Argentina, and so on in many countries of the world.

This topic cannot be understood without reference to circumstance and historicity. Down the course of history, movements of population of any scale have provided constant impetus to violence and warfare, often in ethnic and religious clashes impervious to diplomacy and resolution. Is it different now? In the *dar al-Harb* where unbelievers lived, a Muslim was traditionally considered unable to fulfill the obligations of his faith, and so in the event of emigration faced a challenging choice between separatism and assimilation. Are Western countries experiencing for the first time in their midst minorities whose religion and culture are so separatist that they are cannot be assimilated? Or in the contrary event of assimilation, what will be the role of Islam? Does “Muslim” remain an appropriate definition, or has it become secondary to Frenchman, Swede, German, and so on? These questions are novel and it is in the media that the answers to them will be tested, and public opinion shaped as a result.

The political conjuncture of the world after 1945 set in flow this particular movement of population. The ending of Western colonialism and the independence of countries hitherto colonies were among the complex factors conditioning events. Muslim immigrants carried to the West diversities from home; they were *Sunni* and *Shi`a*, with factionalisms, regional cultural and social habits, community and clan loyalties all their own. Structures from the old days of empire came to be reproduced in one Western metropolis and another. The majority of British Muslims are from the Indian sub-continent, and they are adherents of the *Jama`at at-Tabligh*, a non-political movement of latter-day *Sufis*, founded in India in the 1920s by Muhamad Ilyas. Libyans tend to move to Italy, Surinamese to the Netherlands, Maghrebi Arabs to France, and so on.

To give an example of what happens in practice — the city of Leicester in 1991 had a population of 270,493, of whom 14 percent were Hindu, 4.3 percent Muslim and 3.8 percent Sikh. The Leicester Muslims were mostly Gujurati-speaking *Deobandis*, who are *Jama`at at-Tabligh* associates. The 50 separate Muslim organizations in just this one city include the *Dawoodi Bohra Jamaat*, the *Ahmediyya* Muslim Association, the *Ismaili Jamaat*, the *Rawal* Community

Association, the *Gujurati* Muslim Association, the *Surati Muslim Khalifa* Society, the King Faisal Jam-e Mosque, the Islamic Center, and much else to delight sociologists. Altogether in Britain there are about one thousand Muslim organizations. In France, there are as many as three thousand separate Muslim organizations.

Transplanted as they have been from countries of origin, these organizations obviously have the aim of defending a particular religious and ethnic identity, rather narrowly defined. Most are religious or cultural in aim. The *imam* and the mosque are central to the many communities. Patronage and power are at stake locally, and inevitably the appointment of the *imam* attracts the attention of the authorities in the country where the *imam* and community originated. A particularly public example was the protracted struggle over control of the Paris mosque and associated religious trusts in France. In the end, the appointment of an *imam* approved by the Algerian government emphasized Algier’s overall control of Islam in France. In comparable power struggles, imams in several British mosques have been deposed. *Imams* in Germany and Belgium have been murdered.

The media provide the forum in which such developments are assessed. Community politics are rough stuff, it is accepted, and what Muslims do among themselves is largely their own business. But undoubtedly the sudden and swift process of immigration and community-building by Muslims — so visible in architecture, clothing, food, social habits — contains the potential for arousing racism and xenophobia in the host countries of the West. Now and again the popular press makes an outrage of some unwonted incident, for instance an Iranian diplomat who for the feast of *Eid al-Kabir* slit a sheep’s throat in a London suburban street, or another Iranian who insisted on marrying a 12-year-old girl in defiance of national law but, he claimed, in accordance with *Shari`ah*. He was deported. The underlying issue is: Are these people coming as others have come before them, to assimilate to national ways including democracy, or is this a reverse colonialism, and the host countries will be expected to adapt to their ways, indeed eventually to become *dar al-Islam*?

In general terms, the answer is already clear. Evidently attracted by democracy and capitalism, immigrants are not just integrating,

but actually assimilating. At the grass roots, emotional attachments may not change, but direct ties to the homeland are diminishing. Second, and now third, generation immigrants are already likely not to know the language spoken by elder members of the families. French youths of Maghrebi descent often cannot speak or read Arabic. In spite of special television and radio programs in Bengali, Urdu, or Gujarati, the same is true of youths in Britain whose families came from the Indian sub-continent.

Muslims in the West now have their own media in which to air the culture-clashes erupting from new values and expectations. Here is a typical letter from a young woman published in December 1996 in *Trends*, which describes itself as “Britain’s Biggest Selling Muslim Magazine.”

I had an arranged marriage when I was very young. I always used to get top grades at school, but then my future husband and his family made it clear that they did not want me to do my exams, but rather get married. So against my will I was married and now have two children. My husband is at times sensible and good but he will not let me study. I have tried to discuss this with him but he has a hundred and one excuses ready. He makes me cry but still he won’t change his mind. I am very unhappy and feel that I have sacrificed so much and given up my youth.

Many, perhaps most, Westerners are secularized to the extent of knowing little or nothing about any religion at all. Insofar as Islam as a religion enters their horizon, they are likely to feel warmer toward it than toward Christianity. Islam continues to call for traditional values, and in particular for family solidarity and community, which is otherwise weakening and which many thoughtful people regret. The Prince of Wales is one who regularly appeals for Islam along these lines. A bishop informs the world that he has spent Lent reading the *Qur’an*. Not long ago Muslim vigilantes cleared prostitutes and drug dealers from the streets of a Birmingham suburb where Muslims lived, and British public opinion approved that they had redressed a failure of the law and policing. Brigitte Bardot complaining that the *muezzin* drowns out church bells is exceptional enough to make headlines.

The sort of people who are anxious to find fault with their own kind and their own society sometimes claim that the media present unfavorable stereotypes of Muslims. An example is a paper put out by the Runnymede Trust under the title of *Islamophobia*, a rather strained Arabic and Greek compound. But it offered virtually no evidence of anything serious. With exceptions of no great importance in one or two countries, immigrants have the same rights and duties as everyone else.

This reasonably positive picture has two shadows, one cast from the Western side, the other from the Muslim. Nobody seems to have had the wisdom to foresee that the drive to build common European institutions, and in all probability some ultimate federation, would provoke backlash nationalistic reactions damaging to foreigners and minorities, Muslim immigrants perhaps first and foremost. The historic nation-state brought about the drafting of constitutions, the rule of law, enfranchisement, and civic rights. Under the pressure of uniting Europe, the nation-state is being drained of these past achievements, and this is weakening democratic essentials, accountability of the authorities, the rule of law, and that trust in the state which the citizen must have if he is to obey its demands.

Feeling themselves improperly represented, unable to obtain a hearing, people in Europe are turning to new nationalist — and to some extent, tribalist — parties: the National Front in France, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Flemish Bloc, the Basque ETA, and dozens of groupings in Germany and Sweden and elsewhere, some of them clandestine and inclined to terrorism. Seeking to protect national and even tribal identities in what is now a recurrent pattern across Europe, these parties and their members encourage xenophobia and racism, which are rising to ever-higher levels of violence culminating in arson and murder.

One extreme, as usual, feeds another. Unable to integrate to an abstract, non-sovereign concept like Europe, Muslims increasingly find themselves relegated to the same uncomfortable neither-quite-in-nor-quite-out position that they were in the old Soviet Union, and so fall back on Islam for their primary identity. If really they are to be a tribe, then they may as well be the *umma*, or community of the faithful. The opening is thus created for Islamism.

Islamism preaches separatism as the overall solution — with the long-term objective of converting any and all countries in the *dar al-harb* to Islam. Called by its proper name, this is a reverse colonialism.

Iran and Arab countries have exploited Islamism to project power and foreign policy aims. What might look like a community organization for immigrants in a number of cases turns out to be sponsored and paid for to serve one or another absolutist ruler. An estimated 47 of the British Muslim organizations are thought to be fronts for *Hamas*. Bradford boasts of the Saddam Hussein Mosque, in effect a propaganda outlet designed to further that ruler's interests in the city where the Rushdie controversy started.

Some of this is covert. Either Iran or Saudi Arabia, or sometimes disconcertingly both in their religious and ethnic cold war, sponsor groups like *Hizbullah*, *Hamas*, *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the *Al-Kifah* Society in America. Likewise, they sponsor individuals in the style of Dr. Kalim Saddiqi, paid for by Iran to advocate the establishment of a separate Muslim parliament in Britain. Mysteriously financed, the Syrian-born Sheikh Omar Bakri appears on television to praise the *Taliban* or terrorists in Yemen, and to warn Westerners that soon they will be stoned to death for their sins.

And some of the activity is overt. The Arab press of Beirut was destroyed in the Lebanese civil war. London now has more than 50 newspapers published in Arabic, and many more magazines and journals. Controlled, for the most part directly owned, by members of the al-Saud royal family, these publications promote Saudi interests primarily, but sometimes serve as a forum for debate otherwise not available. During the 1991 Gulf War, the columnist Khalid Kishtainy could write about Saddam Hussein in a style which would have been his death-sentence at home. A former Libyan Prime Minister is able to publish an article in *Sharq al-Awsat*, arguing that any peace terms that the Arabs can obtain with Israel is better than more dispute and war.

Falastin al-Muslima, the main *Hamas* paper, is published in a glossy format in a London suburb. The Bahraini and Libyan oppositions, the Tunisian Islamist movement *Al-Nahda*, the Algerian front *Islamique de Salvation*, are among many others publishing abroad in this manner. Western countries today seethe with an underworld of

Arab and Iranian paid agents, hit squads, dissidents, and adventurers who are responding not to local conditions but transplanted domestic considerations. Who exactly is manipulating whom is never very obvious, and truthful and accurate reporting is hard to come by. What the Westerner observes is the exploitation of one issue after another — Bosnia, Palestine, Afghanistan, Chechnya — or the abuse of the open society through the attempted assassination of the pope or the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, manufactured causes like the Rushdie affair or the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls in French schools.

Banned in the Middle East, *Hizb ut-Tahrir* claims the right of free speech in Britain in order to dedicate itself to a *Khilafah*, or unified Islamic state, in Europe. Its meetings provoke violence. In its publication, *Al-Khilafah*, in December 1996, an editorial declared, "All over the world the twin evils of freedom and democracy have reaped havoc with people's lives." The founder of a group of his own, *Al-Muhajiroun*, Sheikh Omar Bakri writes in one of his numerous pamphlets, "Democracy is a concept the West has conjured to destroy the Islamic state." Elsewhere he elaborates, "The idea of a democratic society is deceptive, dangerous, and unworkable. The party considers it is *haram* (forbidden) to establish or participate in parties which call for capitalism, socialism, secularism, nationalism, or any other religion other than Islam. We are surrounded by a sea of *Kafir* (unbelief): *Kafir* thoughts, practices, and *Kafir* systems of life. Homosexuals, adulterers, fornicators, will be killed, and Jews too."

Such threats are in open defiance of British law, which forbids expressions of hate. A leaflet distributed lately at the Saudi-financed Central Mosque in Regent's Park typifies many hundreds of such incitements to ordinary Muslims. "Do something to prove that on your shoulders there stands a head, not a piece of cheese. Throw a stone, trigger a bomb, plant a mine, hijack a plane, do not ask how."

Democracy sometimes appears paralyzed by those who take advantage of its freedoms in order to abuse them for undemocratic ends. Islamists make out that all Muslims are in their mold, or must be compelled to be. Their leaders raise suspicions and us-or-them hatreds, which do untold harm to ordinary people who ask

for nothing more than to be integrated as democratic citizens who happen also to be Muslim. Whether Western or Muslim, the media provide perhaps the only immediately available means to rescue such people from such leaders.