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Islam in Europe: Clashing or Co-Existing Civilizations?

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Is Islam in Europe an integral part of an evolving multicultural universe or a threat to the integrity of European societies? An analysis of the challenges Muslim migration presents to Europe reveals a complex picture, both for Muslims themselves and for European states and societies.

For the past decades, and especially since the 1980s, when the phenomenon of permanent, mass Muslim migration in Europe could no longer be ignored, Muslim-Arab religious scholars have sought to define the identity and duties of the emigrants. Regardless of sect, Islamic legal school, nationality or political status, they reached similar conclusions.

The scholars' consensus involved five points. First, a global religious-political Muslim nation (*umma*) exists, and Muslims are part of it regardless of their geographical location. Second, while living in a non-Muslim society is undesirable, it might be legal on an individual basis if the immigrant acts as a model Muslim. It is the duty of the individual Muslim to examine whether residing within a non-Muslim society weakens his religiosity, and if this is the case, he must return home. Third, it is the duty of the Muslim in the West to reaffirm his religious identity and to distance himself from anything contrary to Islam. Hence, he should help establish and patronize mosques, Muslim schools, cultural centers and Muslim shops. Fourth, Muslims in the West must

champion the cause of the Muslim nation in the political as well as the religious sphere. Fifth, the West suffers from a spiritual void, which resident Muslims must counter by spreading Islam. In this regard, bringing infidels closer to the true religion is a task entrusted not only to scholars, but also to laymen.

While these five points represent a consensus shared by scholars of all orientations, sharp variations in praxis exist. Scholars of the *Wasatiya* School, championing a middle-ground approach to Islamic law, are inclined to interpret the five points in practical terms, allowing for a degree of coexistence with the larger non-Muslim societies and even a measure of integration into them, at least as far as professional needs go. By contrast, religious scholars of the Saudi *Wahhabi* School, often associated today with the term *Salafiya*, invoke strict, uncompromising religious demands and a militant approach in regard to the theme of proselytizing. Both approaches fiercely struggle for influence in Europe in mosques and through satellite programs and internet sites.

With the concerns over identity and obligations to society in mind, some Muslim intellectuals, preachers and academics in Europe and the Arab world developed another theory. They emphasized the need to find a balance between assimilating into non-Muslim societies and strictly secluding themselves from their perceived pernicious influence. They regard the Muslim emigrant as an ambassador of goodwill rather than a missionary. Some also call upon Muslims to develop a distinct Muslim-European identity and warn that Muslims scholars outside Europe are unfit to make judgments for Muslims living on the continent. While those propagating these ideas do not enjoy the religious authority of scholars, their voices achieved great resonance among Europe's Muslims.

The pressure on Muslims in Europe to become more explicitly "Muslim", generated by Muslim groups and thinkers, is complemented by the insistence of "host" European governments and societies that they become more Western and liberal. These pressures have radically increased since September 11, 2001. Alongside incidents of physical and rhetorical attacks, the very right of Muslims to practice their religion in public is increasingly put into question, for example, by popular outcries against plans to build new mosques or by objections to the wearing of headscarves. While Muslims compose only 3.5-5 percent of the population in the states of the European Union (not including newcomers Bulgaria and Romania), the popular press in Europe often warns of a "Muslim conquest" and blasts politicians for tendering concessions which enable the "Islamization" of European life. Such attitudes convey a message to Muslim immigrants and their children, often born in Europe, that they are

unwelcome guests or, to the very least, that they must forsake the public, communal aspects of their faith in order to be accepted as equal citizens.

How do Muslims in Europe react to the conflicting and contradictory pressures regarding their identity as Muslims and residents of European states? Who has the upper hand in the battle between the European nation-state and the Muslim nation?

Field research in Arab mosques in the federal state of Hessen in Germany during 2006-2007 may provided some clues. My findings indicate that the German state still possesses great assimilatory forces, even among devout Muslims and second generation Muslims whose Islamic identity has been re-awakened. While these devout Muslims may blast the West for its decadence and policies and declare their loyalty first and foremost to Islam, many are socially, economically and politically embedded within Germany. Moreover, even though the concept of Muslim unity is accepted in principal, it quite often succumbs to a fragmented reality, in which Muslim immigrants organize their communal activities according to their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In addition, political interpretations of Islam put forth by militant preachers and scholars are often utterly rejected.

The concept of the political-religious Muslim nation, however, does have some advantages in the struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslim immigrants. Ironically, because the Muslim nation does not possess any tangible political reality, it is immune from the danger of disappointing its members. Drawing on an idealized past and offering an ideal future, it offers an alternative social order where the ills of poverty, drugs and familial disharmony are forever ameliorated. In addition, because the Muslim nation is deemed universal, it offers a sense of pride to marginalized immigrants. In the words of one 19 year-old German Moroccan: "When I'm in Germany, people call me Moroccan. When I'm in Morocco, people call me German. But a Muslim is a Muslim anywhere".

In addition to the inherent social tensions caused by the presence of a large Muslim population in historically Christian Europe, an additional, less-noticed reason that European societies find it difficult to adequately deal with their Muslim minorities is the heritage of the Second World War and the Holocaust. One prime lesson of the war was that political ideologies rejecting liberalism, democracy and the legitimacy of extant national borders must not be ignored, lest they gain traction and become mass movements, and eventually attain power. Another lesson was that the distance between the demagogic arousal of

hatred against an ethno-religious minority and the murderous consequences that might ensue can be extremely short. It is within the delicate scope of those two lessons from history that Europe should approach the challenges presented by its Muslim minority populations.

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