

An American in Brussels: Discovering Europe's Muslims

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I ARRIVED IN BRUSSELS on a clear Friday evening in late August. En route to my apartment, I anxiously surveyed the city that was to be my home for the next few months. Passing through the center of the upper city, the driver pointed out a few key landmarks, including the American Embassy complex, the Belgian Supreme Court, and Avenue Louise, the Belgian equivalent to New York City's Fifth Avenue. As we descended to the lower part of the city, however, I noticed a stark change. Wide avenues gave way to narrow streets, the buildings looked older, and even the people looked different. The majority of men and women were now dressed in traditional Muslim garb, even more so than I had seen in my visits to Muslim countries. Storefront signs were no longer in French, Flemish, or English, but rather in Arabic. The sidewalks were dirty and the facades of nearby apartment buildings were falling apart. The shops on the street consisted of a coin-operated laundromat; a call center advertising rates for phone calls to destinations such as Morocco, Tunisia, and Istanbul; and a butcher shop with a large sign posted in the front window reading "Halal".

This was not what I expected to find in the capital of the European Union. I was initially surprised by the predominance of Middle Eastern ethnic culture in a European city. Since I am more familiar with areas of the Arab and Islamic world than with Europe, however, these surroundings comforted me. I felt like I could have been anywhere in the Middle East or North Africa.

THE EUROPEAN MUSLIM: A THREAT TO EUROPE?

The riots in Paris in the fall of 2005 and the outrage at the controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published in the Danish

newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, have focused the world's attention on Muslims living in Europe. Leaders, scholars, and analysts have responded in various ways to the "Islamicization" Europe is currently experiencing. Some have expressed concern over the demographic shifts in Europe, while others have examined the difficult history of the integration of immigrants into European society. Still others have attributed the growing tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim European communities to Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations." As neither an expert nor a policy analyst, I can only bring to this ubiquitous discussion my personal opinions and experiences as a young Jewish-American woman living in a Muslim community in Brussels. Walking down the streets everyday, shopping in local markets, and interacting with both Muslim and non-Muslim Belgians, I was able to gain intimate insight into this complex issue.

There are an estimated 20 to 25 million Muslims in Europe who constitute between four and five percent of the total European population. However, because most European countries bar any questions on religion in the national census, it is difficult to determine the accuracy of these figures.¹ Using projected birthrate and population trajectories in Muslim and European communities in Europe, there are estimates that by 2025 the Muslim population will double, while the European population will continue to decline.² Furthermore, the future inclusion of Turkey into the European Union would add 70 million additional Muslim citizens to Europe's population.

If it were not for the dismal state of Muslim communities in Europe today, these numbers alone would not necessarily be problematic. Despite the widely known fact that Islam is the second most popular religion in most European countries, 13 of these countries still do not recognize Islam as an official religion. As such, Muslims remain an unrecognized minority, deprived of most rights, safeguards, and protections against discrimination that are afforded to other minorities.³ Even though second and third generation immigrants have been born and raised entirely in Europe, in many parts of the region to be Muslim continues to be synonymous with being an immigrant. Because of this, many of these second and third generation children feel more connected to their Muslim roots than their European homes.⁴

THE MUSLIM GUEST WORKER: A HISTORY

The mass immigration of Muslims to Europe was a consequence of post-World War II reconstruction efforts. Government-sponsored "guest worker" programs brought large groups of Muslim immigrants to Europe as cheap

labor. The immigrants aided the reconstruction process and helped Europe recover from the scars of the World War. These programs intended that the “guest” immigrants would leave after their work was done. However, many remained over and liberal family reunification laws allowed them to bring their families to Europe shortly thereafter. Even after European countries closed their doors to labor immigration in the 1970s, approximately 500,000 immigrants and 400,000 asylum seekers from Muslim countries continued to arrive each year,⁵ using legal loopholes such as the lax family reunification laws.⁶

Unfortunately, few attempts were made by European governments or communities to integrate these culturally conservative and economically disadvantaged communities into European society. The Muslim populations thus remain isolated in homogenous enclaves. As is the case of the Brussels neighborhood where I lived, these enclaves are typically more characteristic of the local population’s native culture than to that of the host country.

THE BELGIUM MUSLIM

In 2003, an estimated 400,000 Muslims in Belgium – the majority of who are of Turkish or Moroccan origin – constituted approximately four percent of the total Belgian population. Approximately 35 percent of the Turkish and Moroccan populations in Belgium are below 18 years old, nearly doubling the number of youths below 18 in the native Belgian population. It is no surprise that the most popular names given to babies in Brussels are Mohammed and Sarah.⁷

There are many factors that I observed in my time in Belgium that I believe contribute to the growing divisions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Belgian society. Most Muslims in the country come from a considerably lower socioeconomic background than their non-Muslim counterparts. However, the welfare system, which is one of the most generous in all of Europe, does provide an adequate living standard for many poor families. There are many immigrants for who a monthly welfare check constitutes 70-80 percent of their income. This situation provides little incentive for the second and third generation immigrants to find substantial work. Their mindset contrasts with that of the first generation immigrants, who worked hard to climb the social ladder.⁸

The blame, however, cannot be put entirely on the Muslim community. Discrimination also contributes to the growing divide between Muslim and non-Muslim Belgians. Even though the younger generations of Belgian Muslims are citizens by law and far better educated than their parents and

grandparents, they still face the same fierce prejudice in the job and housing markets that their parents did.⁹ In many cases, they are essentially barred access to stable public and private sector jobs. Even with legal protections, it is difficult for someone with the name Mohammed or Omar to get a job in Belgium.¹⁰ There are no official statistics for Muslim employment levels. However, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that unemployment rates for foreign-born nationals, at least partly reflecting those of second-generation citizens, are more than twice those of indigenous Belgians.¹¹

Although the Belgian government has not been generous or attentive enough with its immigrant populations, it has done more than many other European countries. For example, it has not prevented Muslims living in Belgium from enjoying the benefits of the generous welfare system. Furthermore, Belgian law allows the government to help finance mosques and pay imams, just as it supports churches, priests, synagogues, and rabbis. In 2000, a new nationality law further eased restrictions on the right to Belgian citizenship, stating that all those born in Belgium, those with at least one Belgian parent, or those who reside in Belgium for seven years may become full citizens.

In many Muslim communities, however, the younger generations are resisting, ever more forcefully, assimilation into secular European societies. In contrast to the United States, where it is socially acceptable to have a dual identity, in most European countries dual identity is far less socially acceptable. Second and third generation Muslims feel pressure to assimilate in a way they fear will strip them of their Islamic and ethnic identities. They thus resist any form of integration.

On the streets of Brussels, one way to distinguish immigrant neighborhoods is by counting the number of satellite dishes on apartment buildings. Ironically, the most satellite dishes are found in the lowest income communities. As such, immigrant neighborhoods are referred to as “satellite cities,” where nobody is ever far removed from the “local” news broadcasts of their ethnic homeland. This causes concern for many Europeans. They fear these communities are being influenced by provocative anti-Western broadcasts from abroad.

THE WAY FORWARD

The world recently witnessed a manifestation of the schism that has developed between Muslim communities in Europe and their governments and native neighbors in major European cities. Although it is reasonable for European governments to attempt to regulate satellite television broadcasting in order to monitor how much anti-European propaganda is being shown,

they must recognize Muslim discontent and address the deeper social and economic issues confronting these communities. Hopefully, they will then be able to mitigate, and eventually end, clashes and tensions. The violence and chaos that erupted after the printing of the cartoons have forced governments to recognize that there are problems they must face. The question that remains is how to deal with them. What can be done to bridge the wide gaps between immigrant and native communities in the same societies? How can almost half a century of damage caused by insufficient mechanisms of integration be repaired? Addressing these challenges may be especially difficult in countries with long histories of fear, exclusion, and persecution of minority communities.

The contrast between European neighborhoods and Muslim neighborhoods in Europe is not limited to appearance. I did not feel welcomed by the local residents during my two months living in a Muslim neighborhood in Brussels. It was uncomfortable, not because I was an American in a European capitol, but because I was a Western woman who did not cover my hair and dared to walk alone, even at dusk, in a neighborhood where most residents were North African, and where the few women who walked around outside tended to be traditionally covered. I do not fault the neighborhood residents for the way I was stared at or called to as I walked down the streets. There is no one person, government, or institution that is at fault for the sorry level of tolerance in such neighborhoods. All citizens, religious leaders, community leaders, and national and supranational governments must come together to recognize, address, and remedy this situation. The historical lack of integration and current separation between neighboring, yet different peoples has already caused much damage in many European cities. Brussels has not yet been afflicted by the violent outbursts seen in Paris and Denmark, but that gives Brussels all the more reason to act now.

Only after European governments determine how to better integrate their minority communities and properly absorb the vast number of immigrants into their societies, will we be able to judge whether it is possible to peacefully bring such vastly different cultures together. It is too soon to give up on that dream. Civil society initiatives that encourage encounters between differing, but neighboring, peoples, and grassroots efforts to teach the younger generations about “the other” have begun, and must spread. Work towards coexistence should be encouraged and implemented simultaneously from government and grassroots initiatives. If anything can be learned from the immigrant experience in America, although the road to integration will be long and turbulent, these cultures can successfully coexist.

¹ Savage, Timothy M. 2004. Europe and Islam: Crescent Waxing, Cultures Clashing. *The Washington Quarterly*. Vol. 27:3, p 25-50.

² Leiken, Robert S. 2005. Europe's Angry Muslims. *Foreign Affairs*, July/August.

³ Savage

⁴ Leiken

⁵ Savage

⁶ Leiken

⁷ Islam and Muslims in Europe: Belgium. Euro-Islam.info. [<http://euro-islam.info/pages/belgium.html>]

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Savage

¹⁰ The 1981 Law on the Suppression of Racist Acts, as well as the anti-Discrimination Law 2003 forbids against the public incitement to discrimination, hate, or violence against a person, a community, and its members. According to these laws, violence or incitement to segregation or discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or nationality – and even intention of such – is deemed a crime. (Euro-Islam, ECRI Report on Belgium, 2003).

¹¹ Islam and Europe: Belgium