The Emancipation of Europe’s Muslims

By Jonathan Laurence

Just over 1 percent of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims reside in Western Europe, yet this immigrant-origin minority has had a disproportionate impact on religion and politics in its new and former homelands.

The Muslim population ballooned in just fifty years from some tens of thousands to 16 or 17 million—approximately one out of every twenty-five Western Europeans—in 2010. During the formative decades of this settlement (1960–1990), Europeans permitted foreign governments and NGOs from the Islamic world to have a free hand in shaping Muslims’ religious and political life. But persistent integration difficulties and sporadic terrorism persuaded European governments that their laissez-faire approach had far-reaching unintended consequences on host societies’ way of life. Between 1990 and 2010, authorities across Europe belatedly acknowledged that the once—temporary labor migrants—and now, their children and grandchildren—are part of the permanent demographic and political landscape. Their earlier hesitation incurred costs, however, and their newfound sense of ownership is plagued by ambivalence. With projections showing continued demographic growth before leveling off at 25–30 million people (or 7–8%) in 2030, Western European governments have no choice but to look upon their Muslim minorities today as angels imprisoned in a block of marble: a community of new and future citizens whose contours are still being sculpted.1

As European Muslims have become more numerous and visible in public life in the past decade, national governments have expended time, effort, and resources on pursuing policies that would encourage the integration of these immigrant-origin populations. The consolidating instinct of the nation-state has been in full resurgence, as governments across Europe conspicuously pursue the preservation of national identity, social cohesion, and “guiding culture.” Measures have ranged from religious restrictions—such as banning burkas, minarets, or headscarves—to civic impositions, like mandatory language and integration courses and citizenship tests. In the realm of state-mosque relations, European governments have encouraged the development of national forms of Islam by way of formal councils and consultative bodies. If there was ever a mythical postwar era of “multiculturalism” in which host societies sent mixed signals to new arrivals about the cultural expectations of national citizenship, a new and more demanding phase has replaced it.

For host societies like Britain, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, Islam in Europe is no longer just a matter of ginger diplomacy with former colonies or current trading partners: the integration of Muslims has become a nation-building challenge of historical significance. This religious minority is novel for its sheer scale and swift pace of migratory settlement: Muslims now make up 4–8 percent of
their national populations—and several times that proportion in some cities.

Foreign governments and transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continue to compete for influence over the Islamic diaspora, but Muslims’ permanent settlement in Europe now places this competition squarely within domestic politics.

In important respects, European countries have been here before: in the past two hundred years, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, working classes, women, and other ethnic minority or migrant groups once absent from the body politic gradually acquired full citizenship and in many cases were granted “group” access to representative institutions. Not all groups (or host societies) made the transition without difficulty, and in different contexts those challenges also produced radicalism, persistent integration problems, or political violence. Integration never depended purely on individual equality before the law. In the words of a nineteenth-century historian, “The real touchstone for success... was its collective emancipation.”

The institutional responses during these earlier moments of “emancipation” left behind an architecture of state-society relations and consultative mechanisms which governments today have restored to facilitate the integration of Muslim communities. European nation-states now face an added challenge in comparison with the past: the persistence of foreign interests that keep a hand in European Muslim life. Today, the interaction of religion policies in Europe and the Muslim world has geopolitical resonance.

During the half-century since the first guest-workers arrived, official and nongovernmental religious organizations originating in the Islamic world supplied funding and personnel in support of rival political-religious tendencies in European mosques and cultural centers. Diasporas play a decisive role for the main countries of emigration—Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, and Turkey—some of which are still in an intermediate phase of political and economic development. For them, Europe is home to 50–85 percent of their nationals living abroad: roughly four million Turks, three million Algerians, three million Moroccans, and two million Pakistanis. These European residents remain a reservoir of support or opposition for homeland regimes, including the remittances and investments that make up a significant portion of homeland GDP as well as extremist elements that plot political violence at home. Europe’s Muslims have also been the target of extensive missionary work by transnational Islamist movements—based in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Pakistan, but also in Europe—who aim to strengthen their own religious hegemony within the international ummah.

Viewed from the capitals of the Islamic world, the Muslim diaspora vacillates between the role of budding vanguard or potential rearguard.

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The crucial years of 1989–1990 provided an early glimpse of a newly politicized minority—during the first headscarf affair, the Rushdie Affair, the first Iraq war—and national governments in Europe soon afterward began to take “ownership” of their Muslim communities. In particular, they initiated the process of bringing Islamic leadership into state-church institutions to mitigate the religion’s “foreignness” and to gain regulatory oversight over mosques and prayer rooms. After leaving them outside domestic institutions, public authorities across Europe have come to encourage Muslims to embrace national citizenship and to pursue the institutional adaptation of Islamic organizations.

Nonetheless, Muslims’ long-term integration into European politics and society is a work in progress. Across the region, a lively debate rages over Islam’s compatibility—and Muslims’ ability and willingness—to accept the rule of law and the separation of religion from the public sphere. The populist right wing’s growing share in several major immigration countries reflects mounting anxiety about the threat posed to national identity and national security by a permanent and growing Islamic minority. Several major fault lines of international conflict of the last forty years lie in the Middle East, which has amplified the significance of Muslims’ political and religious orientations in Europe as an issue of domestic and international interest.

Many Muslims living in these countries, in turn, feel stigmatized by growing antagonism toward their religious background—negative feelings about Muslims reached 35–60 percent in a recent European study—and so they experience an increasingly scruti-
experiencing the throes of a distilled and abbreviated era of emancipation: a dual movement of expanding religious liberty and increasing control exerted over religion. Every religious community that has joined the national fabric accepted certain restrictions on its freedoms and autonomy at the moment of recognition: from the use of local clergy who preach in the local language, to abandoning distinctive dress in the public sphere. As Muslims are transitioning from a majority-immigrant to majority-citizen group, European states have begun the effort to relieve what they consider excessive pressures of foreign political or religious influences.

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This dual movement is most visible in the officially encouraged “privatization” of religious practices—the nineteenth-century injunction, for example, to “be a man in the street and a Jew at home... a brother to your countrymen and a servant to your king” that other religious communities have also experienced during the modern era. The variegated experience of post-Emancipation Jewish minorities in Europe also illustrates the dangers of unresolved tension between individual and collective rights. This is reflected in the preoccupation that communities must effectively sacrifice their distinctiveness and collective identity in the name of legal and political equality, compounded by the sinking fear that they may never entirely escape suspicion and persecution. With the contemporary restrictions of visible Islamic symbols, host societies trace the outer limits for practices which they consider beyond the pale. But there is much more within the pale that is now treated as routine. Until 1990, European Muslims existed in a pre-emancipatory state: adult migrants (and sometimes their native-born children) enjoyed highly circumscribed political rights, subject to limits on freedom of assembly and association, to voting, holding public office, and public employment. The basic rights and freedoms granted to religious communities, too, were largely out of reach in the absence of citizenship. Between 1990 and 2010, European governments implemented new policies, raising standards and expectations for the integration of newcomers, but they have made citizenship more accessible and increased both individual and collective equality before the law for those who were already there.

Today, national interior ministries across Europe help oversee and coordinate the routinization of Islamic religious practices in Europe (what one French Muslim leader has called “the right to indifference,” in opposition to “the right to be different”): the financing and construction of mosques; the civic integration of imams; the appointment of Muslim chaplains in prisons, the army, and hospitals; the design of religious curriculum in publicly funded schools; and the celebration of major holidays and religious events—from lamb slaughter for Eid al-Adha to the pilgrimage to Mecca. There are now thousands of Islamic houses of worship—2,100 in France, 2,600 in Germany, 1,200 in the UK, 661 in Italy, 450 in Spain, 432 in the Netherlands—and thousands of imams who preach and lead prayer in these mosques. Muslim schoolchildren are increasingly free to choose an Islamic education class at school or to attend a publicly subsidized Islamic school, and Islamic theology chairs in public universities—to train religion teachers as well as prayer leaders—are gradually becoming endowed. These developments are not yet on a par with other religious communities, but they are the rights and privileges—from the controversial to the mundane—that make up the business of state-mosque relations.

Contemporary Islam Councils are the culmination of a search for “moderate” yet legitimate interlocutors who can negotiate a representative bargain with the state in exchange for a monopoly on a set of narrowly defined religious issues. Together, these policies aimed to ensure that both public claims and private practices associated with the group are accorded similar rights—and are subject to similar restrictions—as any other recognized group under national law.

However difficult and unique the contemporary difficulties with Islamic groups could appear, the challenges today’s governments face and the strategies they have adopted echo earlier institutional interactions with “new” groups of citizens. European states have pursued a twofold strategy of incorporation toward Muslims in the early twenty-first century—full citizenship followed by institutional organization—similar to what they did for nineteenth-century emancipated Jews and for the newly enfranchised working classes in the early twentieth century. First, governments have sought to establish the bases for participation in state and society as equal citizens, irrespective of affiliations an individual may privately hold. Second, they endeavored to bind the group’s associations to the state through formal relations and corporatist institution-building.

The most striking illustration of a Europe-wide move toward the “domestication” of Islam—and the summit of the process of institutional recognition—came with the development of national consultations with prayer spaces and civil
society organizations. Between 1990 and 2010, national interior ministries established local and national “Islam Councils”—from the French Council for the Muslim Religion, the Spanish Islamic Commission, the Belgian Muslim Executive, the Italian Islamic Consultation, to the German Islam Conference—comprising the religious leadership of foreign governments, NGOs, and prominent Muslim citizens active in their territories. The creation of these councils guarantees equal access to religious freedoms at the same time that they exert control by placing the state in the familiar role of broker and guarantor of religious freedoms.

The parallel development of Islam Councils in these countries was the result of key policy actors finding similar solutions to similar problems. European governments have created local and national councils to resolve practical issues of religious freedom and infrastructure—imams, chaplains, mosques, education, halal food, etc.—for their Muslim citizens and residents. But the essence of state-mosque relations is a twofold struggle on a higher plane: first, to free European Muslims from direct foreign government oversight. And second, to induce the “moderation” of the religious organizations linked to transnational Islamist movements. Governments' goal is to diminish the foreign ties of Islamic prayer spaces and leadership, and to attract the participation of “moderate” political-religious movements within state-mosque relations. To understand the ambition of these councils, one needs to take into account not only the evolution of religion policy in Muslim-majority states between the moment of modern state formation and the departure of emigrants in diaspora, but also the ways in which Islamic movements have been transformed upon contact with the institutional parallelism they have encountered across Europe.

European governments are not just reconciling Islam with the western democratic state; they are tampering with a fragile equilibrium in the respective host countries and entire Islamic world, intentionally or not.

Government ministries involved in this consultation process do not presume the existence of some essential “Muslim” waiting to be white-washed into a mythical “citizen.” But regardless of Muslims' diversity of national origin, piety, and religious affiliation, governments in Europe have nonetheless come to see “their” Muslims as a community, a collectivity, and the object of public policymaking. Religion was not the first or only trait that governments took on: outreach programs in favor of naturalization, linguistic integration, civic knowledge, and political participation have all had their day. But religion policy in particular allows European governments to gradually take “ownership” of their Muslim populations because it grants them unique influence over organizations and leadership within this hard-to-reach minority.

European states exercise an unusual amount of regulatory control over state-church issues from the controversial to the mundane: entry/residence visas for clergy and diplomatic religious counselors, tax breaks and nonprofit status for religious organizations, construction permits for prayer space, the licensing of slaughterhouses. Administrators are not engaged in the special accommodation of Muslims; they are incorporating Islam into pre-existing state-church institutions. European governments are trying to create the institutional conditions for the emergence of an Italian or German Islam, e.g., rather than just tolerating Islam “in” Italy or Germany.

Councils are also often pointed to as a way to deny oxygen to religious extremists who allege a general Western hostility to Islam. State-mosque relations reinforce religious freedom and create a shared sense of belonging by reaching out to respected religious leaders in Europe and ensuring that Muslims can fully practice their faith in European contexts. By bringing Islam in, these governments hoped to diminish the risks of the exposure
of Europe’s Muslims to the globalized market-place of religious ideas, poor socioeconomic integration, local religious tensions, and the shortcomings of Europeans’ other integration policies. This layered agenda was expressed in policies that grant religious rights to Muslims while affirming the state’s oversight authority and the rule of law.

While important milestones in the “citizenization” of Europe’s Muslim population and the “naturalization” of Islam have been achieved, the situation remains in flux. The status and role granted within the Councils to a select group of mosques and other religious organizations—i.e., those who represent Muslim positions on everyday “religious questions”—remain among the most contentious and pressing issues in European politics today. In a debate rife with speculation and extrapolation, state-mosque relations are happily grounded in concrete facts and measurable relationships and institutional behavior. This permits the evaluation of the growing track record of Islamic organizations’ most sustained encounter with democratic institutions outside the Muslim-majority world. Do Islamic groups adapt to Western institutions or not? How have governments attempted to shepherd this process?

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These institutions may be destined for obscurity—just like the nineteenth-century Israelite consistories or the trade union-oriented Labor Councils before them—but they serve an important purpose at the time. The creation of Islam Councils marks a breakthrough as significant and peremptory as a common European currency or the laying of a mosque cornerstone in a city center. From this moment on, Islamic leaders are at once hemmed in—and yet also an integral part of the political landscape.


About the author

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Notes

1. On the verge of an earlier age of state formation, prior to the Second Reform Act that extended suffrage to part of the working classes, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli was said to have discerned the “Conservative working man as the sculptor perceives the angel prisoned in a block of marble,” *The Times* (London), 1883. His contemporary Lord Derby wrote, “No doubt we are making a great experiment and taking ‘a leap in the dark’ but I have the greatest confidence in the sound sense of my fellow-countrymen, and I entertain a strong hope that the extended franchise which we are now conferring upon them will be the means of placing the institutions of this country on a firmer basis, and that the passing of this measure will tend to increase the loyalty and contentment of a great proportion of Her Majesty’s subjects.” 1867. Source for demographic projection: Pew Forum, “The Future of the Global Muslim Population,” 2011.


3. The precise ratios of emigrants in Europe versus total nationals abroad are difficult to obtain but approximately as follows: Turkey: 4 million / 5.5 million; Algeria: 4 million / 5 million; Morocco: 2.7 million / 3.4 million; Pakistan: 1.75 million / 4 million.


5. Cf. The political philosopher Patchen Markell’s (2003) concept of a “double bind” and the political economist Karl Polanyi’s (1944) description of the simultaneous emergence of market economies and the expansion of social protections from the market.


