

Muslim Immigration:

The Effects of Domestic Policy on Security in the United Kingdom

Conor McFarland, Lynchburg College

European and Muslim societies have a long, and often confrontational, history which dates back centuries. In fact, “Islam’s association with Europe is nearly as old as the religion itself” (Masci 4). Since the Muslim invasions conducted through Spain and into France in the eighth century and the subsequent Christian Crusades, which followed centuries later, tension and distrust have been the chief characteristics of the relationship between Europe and Islam. The relationship has changed little over the centuries and has recently become noticeably worse. The reason for this debate is that Western Europeans have come into increasing contact with the growing population of Muslims within European borders. Another reason is that “Europe’s fastest growing neighbors today are predominantly if not wholly Muslim” (Ferguson). “This rapid growth is caused by both rapid immigration and high Muslim birthrates” (Masci 3). In the United Kingdom, this increased immigration has given rise to various domestic policies, some new and others already in place, which affect the relationship between non-Muslims and Muslim immigrants. To prevent outbursts of aggression and to decrease tension, the way in which these policies affect Muslim groups needs to be understood. Governmental policies should aim to reduce feelings of isolation and discontent, feelings which can lead to the creation of radical Islamic groups. In a post 9/11 world, governments are extremely concerned about terrorist groups and should therefore make certain that their policies do not produce any preventable home grown threats. This issue is timely because of Huntington’s prediction that in the near future, “the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural” (348).

The condition which exists within the United Kingdom today, one increasingly on the edge of conflict, is not because the Muslim and historically Judeo-Christian peoples are incapable of peacefully coexisting, but because domestic policy harms relations between the majority and minority. Perhaps reducing what sometimes seems to be insurmountable differences between the West and Islam is a matter of legislation and not our upbringing.

Before judging policy, one must understand those whom the policy is directed toward and how it affects them. The interactions between Islam and Britain are more complex than those between Islam and other European countries. “To Muslims at large, Britain has mainly symbolized a predominantly Christian and rather imperious culture...” (Malik 64). The British government first tried to change this view in the 1970s with the policy of multiculturalism, which aims to preserve cultural identities within a unified state. “Muslims began immigrating to Europe in large numbers following the Second World War” (Fetzer and Soper). This migration was largely caused by the economic boom that occurred after World War II as more low skilled workers were needed in the rebuilding efforts. “The UK is home to 1.6 million Muslims out of a British population of nearly sixty million, according to the UK’s 2001 Census” (Archick). In Europe as a whole, Muslims make up about fifty million people today, up from “twenty million in the early nineties” (Karic). Muslims make up the largest religious minority in the United Kingdom; this situation is likely to continue into the coming decades as “there are now 1,100 mosques in Britain alone” (Burleigh). It is projected that Muslim populations will increase from only five percent of the EU’s 425 million today “to ten percent as early as 2020” (Masci 3). This statistic may even be modest in its prediction about a population which, according to Masci, “has tripled in the last thirty years” (3). One thing is certain: Muslims as a minority in Europe are not

going away any time soon. Their growing presence will only increase the need to facilitate an integration that all parties can agree to.

So as Muslims represent an ever-growing part of Europe, it is necessary to put in place policies that do not create unnecessary tension and confrontation. One such concept that attempts to minimize tension is multiculturalism, which was adopted in the United Kingdom in preference to assimilation. Multiculturalism, which emphasizes the continued practice of social customs in order to preserve a group's identity, is a rather general and overarching mindset of the British government rather than one specific policy. While multiculturalism is a "natural choice for the United Kingdom, given that it was already an assembly of nations," there is debate over whether this policy tends to create strongly separate and distinct communities rather than integrated ones (Archick 15). One may take the wearing of headscarves by Muslim women in school and public institutions as an example. While multiculturalism allows for religious practice, it also creates distinctions among individuals, rather than promoting secularism in public and government facilities. Critics also complain that multiculturalism allows for individual identity at the expense of a common British identity, which is essential in order to reduce feelings of isolation. Before examining the effect of multiculturalist policies on Muslim minorities, it is best to consider the history, starting at the beginning, with their initial immigration to the United Kingdom.

Since 9/11 there has been little in the way of new immigration policy crafted that affects Muslim immigrants. "The only legislation to have been implemented since this time is the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill 2002, which proposed the repealing of certain provisions conferred in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act" (Cesari and Allen 68). One of the changes in this bill includes the removal of the provision for children of asylum seekers to

attend common public schools, forcing them to attend specific separate ones. While this policy obviously creates stress for families, one fact that can be easily overlooked is its ultimate effect of this legislation on Muslim communities. The problem lies in the terminology used to describe Muslim immigrants. Though these legal terms would seem to have little effect, when given different connotations by the press in the U.K., the language of this legislation can ultimately affect the well being of the individuals being described.

As the term “immigrant” has become less appropriate, because many Muslims in the United Kingdom have in fact been there for two or three generations, the term “asylum seeker” has been picked up by the national media since the creation of the Immigration and Asylum Bill 2002. The British tabloids have waged a campaign of stories “focusing on the perceived negative traits of immigrants and the detrimental effect that they were alleged to be having on British society” (Cesari and Allen 68). Because particular asylum seekers who committed the London bombings were alleged to have resided in the U.K., the same associations made with terrorists were then applied to Muslim citizens and recent immigrants who had been improperly labeled by their own government. Since these events, those termed “asylum seekers” “have become more vulnerable and increasingly victims of hostility” (Cesari and Allen 68). Even though it may have been unintentional, by discrediting those Muslim immigrants seeking equal rights and citizenship, the British government has made it more difficult for the process of integration to take its course. This is just one way in which Muslims in the United Kingdom have been negatively affected by domestic policy.

Just as policy can be flawed by what it includes, it can also be flawed by what it omits. The passage of the 1976 Race Relations Act was a step toward greater equality for newly arrived immigrants, yet oddly it made no mention of religion. This Act prohibited discrimination based

on ethnicity or race but did not mention religious beliefs. The government to this day has no policy effectively protecting the free practice of religion “and without specific statutory protection, the state had a positive right to discriminate on the basis of religion” (Fetzer and Soper 31). Since the 1960s and 1970s when they first arrived in the United Kingdom, Muslims have gradually become less timid about their religious beliefs, so legislation has become increasingly more important to them in protecting their religious beliefs. Despite efforts by Lord Ahmed to introduce a bill which would do just that, the Labour government has held out and insisted that adequate protection be provided under the Human Rights Act 1998. This is “a conclusion that Muslims reject” (Fetzer and Soper 32).

When a government fails to acknowledge concerns of a large minority group regarding an issue that is so definitive to them, it is inevitable that tempers will flare and tensions increase. This particular issue cannot be ignored much longer, especially “in London, [where] a recent survey found that a stunning eighty percent of Muslims said they attend mosque regularly” (Masci 5). This type of legislation and the attitudes it embodies can lead to Muslims developing feelings of exclusion and separation from a unified British identity. Faced with this ostracized condition, certain Muslims may turn to radicalized versions of their religion that they might try to practice openly.

As distinct Muslim enclaves and communities form in response to the actions of the state, two common scenarios arise in Muslim neighborhoods. “Some of these areas are vibrant, growing ethnic neighborhoods, but many are breeding grounds for social alienation or worse, with high levels of unemployment, crime, poverty and hopelessness” (Masci 10). These enclaves involve no sense of integration as they prevent Muslims and non-Muslims from interacting, exacerbating the fear and distrust on both sides. Obviously, these conditions have

caused some to speculate about the possibility of Islamic extremism and terrorist group activity. “[Officials] have finally come to the realization that if the government doesn’t support foundations and mosques and community groups, there will be a void and the void will be filled with unsavory types, ... Islamic extremists” (Masci 10). The youth of the United Kingdom are most susceptible, facing the struggle of defining who they are as the sons and daughters of Muslim immigrants. The difficulty in finding one’s place in society as a teenager is made worse when one feels excluded by society because of factors outside one’s control. The religion that distinguishes young people from the majority of Britons thus becomes a safe haven, a place to feel welcome and also a place where radicalized Islam is more likely to be found and chosen as an alternative to the mainstream.

Since the possibility of home-grown terrorism caused by estrangement of Muslim groups has been recognized, the United Kingdom has put into motion several policies to offset the chance of Islamic extremists taking root within their borders.

UK efforts include introducing new citizenship and English language requirements; improving dialogue with Muslim communities and promoting moderate Islam; and tackling disadvantage and discrimination.

In addition, the British government is also seeking to strengthen law enforcement and security measures to curb Islamist extremism and root out terrorists. (Archick 16)

Learning to speak English will reduce the likelihood that Muslims who are not native born will feel cut off from society and will surround themselves only with speakers of their native language. In order to foster greater communication, working groups of Muslim leaders and British governmental officials have been established. Experts gather to discuss various issues

ranging from Islamophobia to education. Steps have also been taken to bring about greater economic equality.

More specific measures that seek to target Muslims and other religious or ethnic minorities include new race equality grants for minority community projects; one recipient, for example, is the Muslim Welfare House in London, which offers English lessons and job advice, among other services. (Archick 20)

Socio-economic status is a major factor in offsetting feelings of separation from a greater British society, perhaps just as much as or more so than political rights.

Now that government officials understand the effect of their domestic policies on Muslim groups and are taking steps to avoid the consequences which stem from them, does the presence of large Muslim minorities within the United Kingdom still pose a real security threat? Esposito asks if Islam and the West are on an inevitable collision course (1). In general, scholars hold three views on what the future of Islam in Britain may look like. Those who hold a generally positive view suggest that “This new larger Muslim presence will not destroy existing European culture and society but reach an accommodation with it” (Masci 14). However, others say “that the segregation, Islamicization, and general lack of integration of Muslims in Europe today does not bode well for accommodation tomorrow” (Masci 14). This prediction could certainly come true if communities do not open up and avoid attitudes that are equally hostile toward their British accommodators. A third view is that “a social collision is becoming inevitable” (Masci 16). This attitude is based on the assumption that acceptance of one another by both Muslims and Britons is impossible. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that no rule says that Islam does not work in a democracy. Likewise, Western values are not wholly foreign concepts to the

Muslim world. “In the Koran you have accountability to public action,” an ideal also embraced by the West (Masci 16). Thus, it is indeed possible that future conflict could be avoided, but only if both sides cooperate.

The solution that would be most helpful in bringing about peaceful coexistence and mutual acceptance by both Muslims and Britons is the decrease in isolationist pressures brought about by outdated and ill conceived policy. The main way to reduce separatist notions is to give full protection to the practice of religion in the United Kingdom. This legislation exists in many nations and has existed for centuries in the United States. State recognition will keep Muslims from feeling that they can practice their religion only within the confines of their homes and other private locations. This act will singlehandedly increase the confidence of Muslims and other religious minorities in their government, reducing the likelihood of their turning to extremist outlets.

A nation’s domestic policy is typically formed with the goal of protecting and improving the lives of the citizens who reside within its borders. Certain policies, however, can increase the feeling of isolation among newcomers to the society and increase the likelihood they will band together as a separate entity, rather than joining the ranks of the citizenry. As distinct differences become more apparent and tensions rise, violence becomes increasingly likely. One nation where this dangerous phenomenon is playing out is the United Kingdom, where religion is the dividing characteristic between the general population and minority groups. To prevent future conflict, it is necessary for domestic policy not only to avoid creating isolationist pressures, but also to foster integration and patriotism among immigrants. Only in this way can progress be made toward quelling home-grown terrorism. Assimilation by minority groups within a country is certainly possible. “Such assimilation, however, is never inevitable” (Miller).

Works Cited

- Archick, Kristin, Francis Miko, and Steven Woehrel. *Muslims in Europe: Integration Policies in Selected Countries*. CRS Report for Congress. Federation of American Scientists, 2005. CSA Illumina. 7 Nov. 2007 <<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33166.pdf>>.
- Burleigh, Michael. "History and Culture: The Christian Tradition, Islam, and Contemporary Europe." *Hoover Digest* 3 (2006). *Hoover Digest*. 2006. Hoover Institution. 30 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/digest/4635886.html>>.
- Cesari, Jocelyne and Chris Allen. "Securitization and Religious Divides in Europe: Muslims in Western Europe after 9/11." Paper presented at GSRL-Paris and Harvard University. Submission to the Changing Landscape of Citizenship and Security, Jun. 1 2006. *Challenge: Liberty and Security*. 1 June 2006. 6 Nov. 2007 <<http://libertysecurity.org/mot69.html>>.
- Esposito, John L. *The Islamic Threat*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Fetzer, Joel S., and J. Christopher Sopher. *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Ferguson, Niall. "Eurabia?" *Hoover Digest* 3 (2004). *Hoover Digest*. 2004. Hoover Institution. 30 Oct. 2007 <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/digest/3020481.html>>.
- Huntington, Samuel. "The Clash of Civilizations?" Reprinted in *War, Peace, and Empire*. Lynchburg College Symposium Readings, Vol.V. Ed. Daniel G. Lang. 3rd ed. United States: Xlibris, 2007. 347-369.
- Karic, Enes. "Is 'Euro-Islam' a Myth, Challenge or a Real Opportunity for Muslims and Europe?" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22.2 (Oct. 2002). 7 Nov. 2007

<<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=1&hid=7&sid=65eedab1-984e-40d7-94ed-1c88795734f8%40sessionmgr3>>.

Malik, Iftikar H. *Muslims and Modernity: Muslims in Europe and the United States*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.

Masci, David. *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe*. *The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life*. Ed. Robert Ruby and Oliver Read. Dec. 2004. 30 Oct. 2007
<<http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/muslims-europe-2005.pdf>>.

Miller, John J. "Profiles in Citizenship." *Policy Review* 83 (May-June 1997). *Policy Review*. Hoover Institution. 7 Nov. 2007
<<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3573792.html>>.