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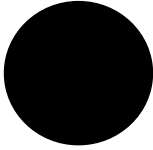

Europe's Muslim Political Elite

Walking a Tightrope

Jytte Klausen

After the July bombings in the London Underground, Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain, who had received his knighthood the month before, condemned the attacks and urged all Muslims to help the police catch the perpetrators. A week later, a group of Britain's prominent imams and Islamic scholars met in a Regents Park mosque and issued a statement denying any religious sanction to suicide bombers. Islam, they said, does not condone extremism. But, as did Sir Iqbal, they went on to blame the alienation and radicalism among young British Muslims on social exclusion and foreign policy. Their statement hinted implicitly that policies toward Palestine and Iraq lay behind "the grievances that seem to nurture a spiral of violence."

The media has had no difficulty gathering meatier statements on street corners blaming Britain—or Spain and the United States—as being responsible for terrorism. Mohammad Naseem, a parliamentary candidate for the Respect Party and chairman of the trustees of the Birmingham Central Mosque, went so far as to declare at a joint press conference with the local police, after one of the bombers had been arrested in Birmingham, that the accused young men were innocent passengers framed by the British government. Muslims, he said, could not trust "the process" to give them a fair trial. Echoing the rumors that the 9/11 attacks on Washington and New York were actually planned by the Central Intelligence Agency, he went on to say that "Muslims all over the world have never heard of an organization called al-Qaeda."[1]

Have Europe's Muslims become apologists for extremism? In truth, sane voices are not difficult to find. Khalid Mahmood, a Labor member of Parliament elected in Birmingham, immediately called for Naseem's resignation, adding acidly, "He has his head in the sand."[2] Who speaks for Europe's Muslims? And what do European Muslim leaders want, if not war with the West? With these questions in mind, I have during the last two years interviewed three hundred Muslim political and civic leaders in six countries (Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden).[3] Some participants accept the label of "Muslim" only as a signifier of demographic origin, but most acknowledge that it is a description of their faith and identity.

"Muslim-European" Politicians

Muslims are seriously underrepresented in Europe's political elites. There are an estimated 15 million Muslims in Western Europe, but fewer than 30 Muslims serving in national parliaments. There is no "Who's Who of European Muslims" from which I could draw a representative sample of leaders. We do not even have a reliable count of the number of Muslims living in Western Europe, or know how many are citizens with the right to vote. With a few exceptions, I met with all the Muslim parliamentarians in the six countries. I estimate that between 1,500 and 2,000 persons of Muslim faith or background in these countries fitted

my definition of political leaders, i.e., as elected representatives or appointed officials in national, regional, or metropolitan civic or political organizations.

The proportion of Muslims who are citizens varies among European countries, largely as a consequence of different naturalization rules that affect their ability to vote and to become elected officials. In most countries, only 10–25 percent of the Muslim population can vote. The exceptions are the Netherlands, where 50 percent of Turks and Moroccans hold citizenship, and Great Britain, where half or more of Muslims are of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian origin, and were born in Britain and are citizens.[4] In some cities with numerous immigrants and their non-naturalized descendants, disenfranchised residents account for a quarter or more of the local population. Nevertheless, the barriers to representation are often lower in municipal politics because residential segregation can create "winnable" seats for minority candidates.

In European parliaments, party discipline is strong, and representatives are not free to speak out for special interests. For many Muslim politicians, who need the support of party colleagues to get ahead, Islam and discrimination amount to what Americans call the third rail of politics: "You touch it and you're dead." As one legislator's assistant explained as we chatted about policy priorities, "Discrimination and the position of Muslims are really difficult areas."[5]

Despite the obstacles, the number of Muslims in Europe's parliaments and city councils has grown incrementally. Currently, the only Muslim member of the French National Assembly is from an overseas territory. Two women of Muslim origin, Bariza Khiari from the Socialist Party and Alima Boumediene Thierry from the Green Party, have been elected to the French Senate. The two take opposing views of the *hijab*, the headscarf that some Muslim women wear; the first supports and the second opposes the French law that banned the wearing of the headscarf and other "ostentatious" symbols of faith, such as the Sikh turban, the Jewish *kippa*, and oversized crosses (the latter was presumably added to make the law seem equitable) in public schools. When I began my interviews, there were only two Muslims in the House of Commons, Khalid Mahmood, mentioned above, and Mohammad Sarwar, from Glasgow. Two more, Sadiq Kahn, representing the London suburb of Tooting, and Shahid Malik, representing Dewsbury, in Yorkshire, were added in the 2005 parliamentary elections. All four stood as Laborites.

Two Muslims, both women, have been seated in the German Bundestag, one from the Green Party and one from the Social Democrats, or SPD. Five members of the Swedish Riksdagen are Muslim, as are three members of the Danish Folketing and seven in the Dutch Tweede Kamer, including two representing the Christian Democratic Party. Among Dutch parliamentarians is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who describes herself as an ex-Muslim and is famous—or notorious—for calling the Prophet a "pervert." She belongs to the VVD, the Liberal Party, and received a record number of personal votes, 68,000, in the 2002 election. (The Dutch electoral system allows voters to vote for a party or an individual candidate.)

The Missing "Second Generation"

It is commonly assumed that it is the native-born descendants of earlier migrants who have risen to represent Europe's Muslims. In fact, a large majority of the current leaders arrived as young adults to study at Europe's universities or as political refugees. A clear generational pattern does not exist in part because in much of Europe the native-born children of immigrants have no automatic claim to citizenship.

Britain aside, restrictive naturalization laws and administrative policies require immigrants to show proof of "sufficient attachment," which is often interpreted to mean

assimilation (e.g., intermarriage and unaccented speech), disqualifying those who receive social assistance, even housing aid. Thus it is not surprising that elected leaders are themselves mostly immigrants. Europe has gone through distinct waves of migration. After labor migration was ended in most countries following the oil crisis and recession of 1974, students and political refugees composed the bulk of migrants. Middle-class refugees and university-educated professionals generally find it easier to prove that they have the language skills, are not dependent on social services, and are "attached" to the new country.

Elected office aside, citizenship is not a necessary prerequisite for civic and political engagement, but, in practice, it matters greatly. And, to my surprise, though few leaders are native-born, most are citizens. (About half of those in my study were asked to fill out a standard questionnaire form. The rest were asked only to allow me oral interviews.) The non-naturalized leaders—between a tenth and a quarter of the respondents—were not elected officials but participated in civic associations. In Denmark and Germany, countries with particularly restrictive naturalization laws, between a tenth and a quarter of the political leaders I identified did not have citizenship.

Two observations follow. One is that easing naturalization is likely to boost immigrant (and Muslim) participation in mainstream political organizations. Conversely, not doing so encourages Muslims to organize "Muslims-only" organizations.

Nine out of ten Muslim leaders in this study were born abroad and came to Europe as young adults. The share of native-born leaders was higher in Great Britain and the Netherlands than elsewhere, undoubtedly a reflection of the earlier onset of mass migration. A high proportion of French leaders were native-born—over half—and they were relatively younger than respondents in the other countries. I hesitate to draw conclusions from these facts because I had difficulty persuading the French leaders to fill out the questionnaire (although no difficulty in obtaining oral interviews). The average age of the French participants was 32 years, compared to between 40 and 42 years for participants from the other countries, and they generally had higher educational status. Yet 10 percent were not citizens, a figure that places France behind Britain, Sweden, and the Netherlands in legal assimilation.

The American scholar Fouad Ajami has painted a dark picture of the Muslim political presence in Europe. In his view, Europe's new Muslim groups provide shields for the Muslim Brotherhood and other banned organizations. Hence radicals have gained power and influence in Europe, broadening the rift with the United States on Middle East policy. He concludes that the radicals have succeeded doing in Europe what they have failed to do in the Arab world.[6] The British historian Niall Ferguson similarly invokes the specter of a Muslim demographic explosion as a source of the widening gap between America and Europe.[7] But Ajami and Ferguson fail to note that even by the most exaggerated estimates less than 10 percent of the population of France and only 3 percent of the population of Britain is Muslim, and less than half have the right to vote, which even fewer do. Ajami is right that Europe's new Muslim leaders are often refugees, but wrong about the political implications. Few are Islamic radicals, and most were dissidents who participated in democracy movements.

What Do Muslim Leaders Want?

Farah Karimi is an Iranian political refugee and has been a member of the Dutch lower house, the Tweede Kamer, since 1998. Elected a decade after her arrival in the Netherlands, she represents the Green Party (Groen Links). As a student, she had taken part in the 1979 Iranian revolution, but her hopes for a democratic outcome were dashed

when the new Islamic government began enforcing religious laws. Women were segregated from men in public, and wearing the *hijab*, which some revolutionaries had put on as a protest against the Shah's forced westernization, was made compulsory. Karimi now thinks that she was naïve when she joined the Islamic student movement. "We thought Islam was good," she says, "because at least it was our own culture."[8] She worries about the conservatism of the Muslim community in the Netherlands and notes that the immigrant organizations are led by old men.

At the same time, Karimi also faults Dutch politicians for lacking the courage to explain certain unpopular policies. Public funding for Islamic schools or for the education of imams is needed, she says, to counter the influence of countries like Saudi Arabia on the Muslim community. But the conditions for rational debate have deteriorated. She has seen a drastic shift in public attitudes toward Muslims, in particular through the experiences of her 20-year-old son. "They see me as a Muslim," he tells her, "so I have to be one." Karimi thinks the current Dutch political climate is "stupid," a word she uses deliberately, because the growing contentiousness encourages extremism on all sides.

Another interviewee, Fatih Alev, was the head of a Danish Muslim student organization and imam for a small congregation at a Copenhagen cultural center. Born in Denmark to Turkish labor immigrants and well-educated, he describes himself as a hyphenated Dane. He approaches all people in the easy egalitarian manner that characterizes Danes. He embraces his Danishness—with one notable exception. He thinks that Danes have lost their spirituality, and that this is the primary reason they have become intolerant of immigrants. "The Danish shelves for faith and spirituality are empty," he says. "They fill them instead with fear of the 'strong' foreigner." His hope is that the presence of Muslim believers will challenge Danes to rethink their relationship to religion.

Alev invests much of his time in interfaith dialogue and advocates strengthened antidiscrimination policies, which he thinks will help Muslims acquire a measure of equality with Christians. He is scandalized, however, when I suggest that new European Union rules on discrimination may be interpreted to disallow religious organizations from discriminating against gays. He also doubts that women should become imams, and insists that the Koran is explicit that women can lead only other women in prayer. Two young female members of his student association disagreed vocally in his presence. Of course women can be imams, they said.[9] In fact, European Muslim women have been leading men in prayer in Koran study groups and in informal mosque settings; the practice became a matter of public controversy earlier this year following reports that Amina Wadud, a professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, had led Friday prayers at a service in New York City.[10]

Karimi and Alev—one a left-wing parliamentarian, the other an imam and university student—belong to a growing new European Muslim elite. They are educated and talented, and their accomplishments and moderation suggest that the current panic about the Islamicization of Europe is misplaced. One may not agree with all they say—they would likely not agree with each other—but the disagreements are within familiar bounds.

The Muslim leaders I spoke with often identify themselves with what they describe as the "new line" in European Muslim politics. They said the new line encompasses a focus on national politics, an emphasis on Muslim unity irrespective of ethnic and religious differences, and certain expectations about professionalism and "playing by the rules" of national political discourse. Further, the new associations mostly conduct business in the national language—Danish,

Dutch, and German—rather than in the languages of the country of origin, as was normal in old migrants' associations.

When Muslim leaders discuss human rights, they draw upon past experiences. Their present engagements are a continuation of previous commitments. Human rights are to them a primary political belief system, in part because the old left-right cleavages in European politics are a poor fit for immigrants and their descendants. As an old friend, now a member of the Danish parliament representing a left-wing party, remarked when we met to discuss my research, "Those people do not think as we do about the histories of the parties and the importance of programs."[11]

Personal Importance of Faith by Political Orientation

	Islam not important, %	Islam sometimes important, %	Islam very important,%
Right	11.4	6.3	5.7
Center	31.5	53.1	64.8
Left	57.1	40.6	29.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of Respondents	35	35	95

Source: Author's questionaire

Faith and Political Ideology

It is commonly assumed that religious faith predisposes individuals to a conservative stance. This is not the case for Muslims in Europe. Most Muslim leaders say that Islam is a significant element in their personal lives. Four of five leaders said their faith was either "very important" or "somewhat important" to them. Well over half were strong believers. Within this group, a third said they belonged to the Left, two-thirds to the center. The latter—religious centrists—were the single largest subgroup. Contrary to the general belief that religious Muslims are right-wingers, I found only a handful of people who said that they supported conservatism and were strongly religious. Half the agnostics were on the left, half on the right, but only one out of five overall responded that faith was not important to them personally. Some in this group were radical secularists, who would say that "we do not need imams here" or "the problem with Islam is that it cannot change."

A majority consider Islam to be very important in their personal lives, but when they describe their political values they emphasize human rights and ethical values like respect, recognition, and parity. Sometimes, the commitment to Islam is a newfound response to perceived prejudice. Two women of Turkish origin who held important positions respectively in the Swedish Social Democratic Party and its Dutch counterpart, expressed identical feelings of rising impatience and belated self-discovery. "When I hear them talk about 'those people,' meaning Muslims, I feel like standing up and saying, 'Hello, I am one of those people,'" said one while pulling at her miniskirt. When I mentioned to the other that I had just spoken to some left-wing feminists who were toying with putting forward legislation to ban the headscarf (the French headscarf ban had just been proposed at that time), she looked quizzical and said, "I used not to think much about Islam; it was just something we do. But my mother wears the headscarf, and I don't see any reason to make her feel bad about that."[12]

The more religious tended to describe themselves as centrist, in part, because many Muslim leaders, and particularly those associated with Muslim associations or mosque groups, are uneasy about major political parties. The preponderance of centrists

among the more religious leaders may reflect a deliberate decision to avoid becoming identified—and taken for granted—by the Social Democratic or Labor parties that historically have counted on immigrant voters.

Muslims who might otherwise be inclined to support conservative parties feel unwelcome because of their traditional emphasis on Christianity as an essential part of national identity. A young German Muslim Christian Democrat told me that he had declined to run for office again (he was formerly elected to a regional parliament) and that he and his colleagues within the CDU had decided not to proceed with organizing a large meeting of Muslim members of the main parties. "What's the point?" he asked. "They will call us Islamist every time we do anything."[13]

The Dutch Christian Democratic Party is more open to Muslims than its German counterpart, and the British Conservative Party has tried to woo Muslim voters by promising, among other things, public support for the creation of more Muslim denominational schools. A handful of Muslims have even run, successfully, for local office representing the xenophobic French National Front and the Dutch Lijst Pim Fortuyn. As one Rotterdam city council member explained to me, "Many older [Muslim] people worry about crime and the young radicals."[14]

Centrist Muslims often join Green parties, because of their emphasis on human rights. But partisan affiliations are scarcely set in stone. A religiously conservative manager of a controversial German association of mosques hesitated when I asked with which party Muslims like himself could best expect to work. "Many people say the Greens," he said. "I'm not so sure. Probably, the Christian Democrats are better." His hesitation was understandable, since he and his association had precipitated yet another volley from the Christian Democrats about Germany's commitment to "occidental" and "Christian" values.[15]

French Muslims complained bitterly about the Socialist Party's intolerance of religious expression, explaining that that you had to be committed to "the holy principle of *laïcité*" to succeed in the party.[16] (Socialists were also among the complainers.) Abortion, gay rights, and bioethics are issues on which religious Muslims find common ground with other religious associations. It is clear, nonetheless, that for many religious Muslims "value conservatism" may be less salient than other issues generally important to the Left, in particular, enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and social welfare. The success of the Dutch Christian Democratic party in attracting Muslim support suggests, on the other hand, that the Right could do better among Muslims if it deemphasized Christianity and spoke instead about religious values in general.

How Much Integration?

When asked what should be done about integration, the consensus was that the ties to the Islamic countries had to be cut and ways found to educate imams at European universities and to normalize the legal situation of mosque communities according to national laws. There were disagreements about how far to push equity with Christian churches. Some protested what they saw as government pressures to "Christianize" Islam, yet agreed that European Muslims had to sever ties with the Islamic world. Many favored "government help" to "self-help" but otherwise believed Muslims should build the religious institutions they want. Others argued for straightforward legal and institutional parity. "What goes for the pastor goes for the imam," said a Danish city councilor.

At the other end were literalists favoring what I call the neo-orthodox view of Islam; they insist Islam should not adjust to national norms. (Neo-orthodox because, as is invariably the case, the pursuit of authenticity in faith requires a great deal of reinterpretation.) We need to distinguish clearly

between those who embrace liberal freedoms for opportunistic reasons, and those who hew to them as first principles. A French *Islamisté* praised liberty for the same reasons American religious groups have supported the First Amendment. He opposed the French government's plans for a "French Islam" because "we have for the first time the liberty to develop Islam freely." He found no problems with *imama*—women as prayer leaders—because as he said, who is there to forbid women from being imams in Europe? One strain of the religious revival among European Muslims celebrates the freedom to interpret the Koran anew and discard the orthodoxy imposed upon the faith by the *ulama*, the religious scholars. A young woman, who was studying Arabic so she could read texts on her own, remarked, "The imams have already lost control."

Others have less acceptable reasons for insisting on the freedom to develop Islam as they see fit. A Danish "sheikh" praised human rights because they "have given Islam a chance to complete its failed project in the Middle East." He regarded human rights as providing a strategic opportunity to promote the ultimate aim of his project: the creation of Islamic states in Muslim countries and, down the road, in the West.

British Muslims are more inclined to neo-orthodoxy than Muslims elsewhere, but sizable minorities of Turkish or Maghrebian origin espouse similar views. They support the application of religious law, *sharia*, in secular European courts. They will often say that *sharia* is at the core of what it means to be a Muslim, but seem to have no consistent view of the obligations involved. Most agree, for example, that religious law must be interpreted in the light of current lifestyles and that reform is needed to address the modern position of women.

Outside Britain, I found no support for using religious law as anything more than optional guidelines for personal conduct. An obvious explanation for the difference is that British Muslims tend to be of South Asian origin, and Pakistan and India have long permitted legal self-governance among religious groups on family law. The *sharia* they would support is a codified body of law interpreted and applied by specialized lawyers and courts. This is not the *sharia* of the imams and self-appointed *fiqh* councils. German, Dutch, and Scandinavian Muslims are often of Turkish descent, and they fail to see how *sharia* can be conjoined with secular legal systems. "We have to face it," said the chair of a Swedish Islamic charity referring to past Turkish multicultural jurisprudence, "There can be no millet system."[17]

Five decades of Muslim migration have, belatedly, forced European governments to accept Islam as a European religion. By being more open to Muslim political self-representation, Britain has opened space for the articulation of radical divisions among Muslims about the nature of their faith. But it is not only in Britain that this has happened. In Germany, much attention has been focused for years on Metin Kaplan, the caliph of Cologne, who is accused of arranging the murder of a competing cleric. More important, albeit less well-known, are Muslims like Lale Akgün, a Social Democrat and member of the Bundestag. When I spoke with Akgün, she was forthright about the changes taking place:

> Muslims now stand up and say that the Koran should be interpreted historically, and others reject this idea, and so on. We must go on with that discussion. It is very important for people, who are open for historical interpretation to reflect on the Koran. Women's rights, human rights, the rights of atheists, and so on and on, are new issues. You cannot participate in the discussion of these issues if you say every word must be taken as if it is the word from God and be accepted as such. We live in 2004, and we have the right to change religion, to have no religion,

> and so on. Islam has to accept our democratic system as a framework for all of us.[18]

Akgün believes that European Islam will change as religious practices bend to social realities. But, like all my respondents, she also believes that Muslims can live fully integrated European lives and still retain their faith. ●

Notes

1. Nick Britten, "Leading Cleric Rails at Injustice of 'Muslim Bashing,'" *Daily Telegraph*, July 28, 2005, www.telegraph.co.uk/news.

2. James Sturcke, "MP Calls for Birmingham Cleric's Resignation," *The Guardian*, July 28, 2005.

3. The selection criteria included individuals in elected or appointed office in national or local governments, and in national, regional, or large city civic organizations. The civic groups ranged from political parties to secular councils for mosques and advocacy groups.

4. Reliable figures are difficult to find except in Britain, where the census records religion and origin. See National Statistics, *Ethnicity and Identity*, www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=459. For the other countries, estimates are based on the country reports in *Intolerance and Discrimination Against Muslims in the EU: Developments since September 11*, report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, March 2005.

5. Interview, Paris, November 18, 2004.

6. Fouad Ajami, "The Moor's Last Laugh: Radical Islam Finds a Haven in Europe," *Wall Street Journal*, March 22, 2004.

7. Niall Ferguson, "Eurabia?" *New York Times*, April 4, 2004, and "The Widening Atlantic," *Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2005.

8. Interview, Amsterdam, December 1, 2003.

9. Interview, Copenhagen, September 5, 2003. In a subsequent e-mail exchange, Alev contested my version of the conversation and argued that the women did not disagree with him. My notes say otherwise.

10. U.S.-based Muslim feminists have provoked the ire of conservative and moderate Muslim leaders by organizing publicly announced prayer services led by women. See Andrea Elliott, "Muslim Group Is Urging Women to Lead Prayers," *New York Times*, March 18, 2005.

11. Interview, Copenhagen, September 8, 2003.

12. Interview, The Hague, November 26, 2003; and interview, Stockholm, November 6, 2003.

13. Interview, Boston, June 15, 2004.

14. Interview, Rotterdam, November 24, 2003.

15. Interview, Berlin, November 26, 2004.

16. Interview, Paris, May 17, 2004; and interview, Lyon, May 24, 2004.

17. Interview, Stockholm, November 5, 2003.

18. Interview, Berlin, November 8, 2004.