

Islam and the EU: moving forward

by John Quigley

Muslims in Europe or, European Muslims? Is there a distinction? It seems that there is and the evidence is growing that many Muslims in Europe do not see themselves as European Muslims but, rather, as Muslims who, for economic, political or refugee reasons, happen to reside in the European Union. Has the EU cause to be concerned? Unfortunately, the actions of a radicalised few suggest that those who believe in the future of democratic society, the rule of law and universal human rights, certainly should be. A minority of Muslims in the EU are increasingly rejecting so-called “Western values” in favour of a outdated notion of the halcyon days of the Islamic caliphate.

It is striking that the issues which radical Islam revolves around, including the Israel-Palestine and Chechnya questions, do not address any of the material problems affecting Arabs or Muslims today, such as lack of employment, education, political participation, development and reform of the economy. Many radicalised Muslims in the European Union currently live in France and the United Kingdom, countries with large Muslim immigrant populations. Yet, having a substantial Muslim immigrant population is not the issue. It is more pertinent to question why these two countries, in particular, have low levels of Muslim integration in society, a dearth of EU-educated Imams and growing numbers of extremists, most of whom are second generation. Moderate Muslims condemn these radical few as a disgrace to the true values of Islam and its civilisation.

One part of the answer may be found if Muslims in Europe look to the main Muslim and Arab countries. There they see little either to emulate or respect. The Organisation of Islamic Conference groups 57 countries as members and a further three as observers and is active in analysing the political situation of Muslims, economic issues, society, culture and science and technology. Meeting in Istanbul in June 2004, the Secretary General of the OIC, H.E Dr Abdelouahed Belkeziz, a Moroccan, told OIC Foreign Ministers that the Islamic *Ummah* (community) is in crisis. A contrast between the past and the present shows the *Ummah* today as “dispersed, divided, diminished and debased”. Muslims are resigned to stand as “the spectator” incapable of changing society or its condition.

Terrorism, the actions of the United States and the growing numbers of radical Muslims suggests the time is right for the Islamic *Ummah* to re-assess how it sees its role in the 21st Century and, also, what kind of interaction the Muslim heartland wants with the West or Europe in particular. Dr Belkeziz, in Istanbul, called for a renewal of the Islamic world’s “democratic, political, social and economic institutions” and a strengthening of its relations with the outside world.

The EU can help at many different levels. The OIC has plans to open a representative office in the EU, both to increase awareness of the Islamic Conference and to understand developments at EU level. These plans should be brought forward and the office opened without delay. Although the membership of the OIC includes some wealthy States, the matter is of such importance to relations between the West and Muslims that, the EU should consider facilitating the office if necessary. Moreover,

Europe runs many different cultural and educational programmes, which could be extended with the co-operation of the OIC to the benefit of European students, political leaders and civil society organisations alike, and, more specifically, those Muslims in Europe who feel cut off from the Islamic *Ummah* and who drift towards extremism. The EU could assist or participate in the “Cultural Strategy for the Islamic World”, which the OIC operates, and the Vision 2020 Project, which aims to develop science and technology in the Islamic world.

Together with its Member States, the European Union currently provides 50% of worldwide official development assistance. Countries, such as Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Yemen are eligible for development funding under the EU’s Asia-Latin America Regulation and all are members of the Islamic Conference. Most of those countries have human rights abuses or rule of law problems but, in alliance with the OIC, Europe could be instrumental in helping Dr Belkeziz meet his vision of Islam fully embracing modernity. This includes systems of government that guarantee legitimate alteration of power, respect for public rights, justice, equality and intellectual and cultural openness. Nevertheless, the EU and third countries should be clear. Respect for the rule of law and human rights normally is an integral part of Europe’s development co-operation. Failure to make progress on these issues, as acknowledged by the OIC Secretary General, should lead to a suspension of aid.

In general, the West has nothing to fear from ordinary Muslims, who live ordinary lives and have much the same hopes for the future as shared by all. The West’s major problem rests with those Arab and Muslim States that have done nothing to modernise either the State regime or the material prospects of their populations. The message from the OIC is clear - Islam needs to find a secure footing in the 21st Century if Muslims are to find a way out of their “crisis of impotence”.

Europeans seem to be afraid of Muslims for reasons that have less to do with Islam than with our own European values and identity. After fighting two world wars in the twentieth century that brought tremendous destruction to the continent, Europeans are rightly reluctant to surrender hard won notions of peace, democracy and the rule of law. The process of European integration that followed after 1945 has seen Europe dilute the concept of a sovereign nation state in favour of a pooling of sovereignty between like minded nations. Herein lies the rub. Values that Europeans treasure, such as secularism and individuality, are inimical to orthodox Muslims. As Europe’s leaders have taken the political process by the scruff of the neck and driven the integration process forward, in turn, European citizenry are less and less inclined to invoke their hard won rights of political participation. While Europe must welcome the Muslim presence in Europe so, equally must Muslims reach out to reassure Europeans that they are prepared, within their faith, to embrace European notions of democracy and pluralism.

The history of the European Union demonstrates that at the central core of the European project lies the concept of accommodation. In the twentieth century the six, then nine, ten, twelve, fifteen and, as of 1st May 2004, a total of 25 Member States have accepted the wisdom of building joint structures and institutions that accommodate their different priorities and objectives. Europe’s recent past demonstrates that it has the ability to accommodate Muslims. All it asks in return is

that Muslims in Europe - European Muslims - should understand why Europe is as it is today.

Political participation for Europeans or European Muslims can, at times, be a frustrating and difficult process. However, in Europe, it is the only game in town. ■

References:

For the speech of Dr Belkeziz, see www.oic-oci.org. For a related speech by EU Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten, see <http://europa.eu.int> "Islam And the West - at the crossroads".

See also:

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“Islam in South-East Asia”

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“The tangled roots of Islamic activism in Indonesia”