Mosques as Communities of Memories vis-à-vis Muslim Identity and Integration in the European Union

Nazila Isgandarova[*]

Abstract:

Mosques represent an important element of Muslim identity. This identity may be social, political, personal, etc., and depends on language they speak, attitudes they have, place where they live in, and activities they enjoy to do. In this regard, mosques manifest gender, ethnic, social class, religion, and culture dimensions of Muslim identity. As a place of community of memory mosques play the memory-preserving function for Muslim generations and retain Muslim identity. European mosques combine the traditions of the worshippers with those of their new environment. Thus, Muslims' attachment to Europe grows and they start to identify themselves with their places in Europe. During this transaction between the two, not only Muslims change under the current European tendencies, but Europe also changes by Muslims' identities. This becomes more evident in increasing number of mosques in EU and the debate about its place in EU life.

Key Words:

Muslim Identity, Europe, Mosque, Memory-Preserving, Integration

[*] Emmanuel College, University of Toronto

Introduction

Muslims have different multiple identities such as social, political, personal, etc. It manifests itself in language they speak, attitudes they have, place where they live in, and activities they enjoy to do. According to these manifestations, Muslims categorize themselves in gender, ethnicity, social class, religion, and culture.

One of the important articles of Muslim identity is linked to home and dwelling, which are very important in their lives. Muslims always attach themselves to place by building symbols and memories. For Muslims, Europe became a place as a geographical space, which has acquired meaning as a result of their interaction with the space. As a place, the European environment has an impact to shape identity of European Muslims. Muslims also try to make EU a product of their physical attributes, human conceptions, and activities. When Muslims' attachment to Europe grows, they start to identify themselves with their places in Europe, not only at a larger scale (nation, city, etc.), but also at a smaller scale (neighborhood, workplace, homes, etc.) This means that Muslims in Europe identify themselves by describing what countries they live in, what city or town they come from. This is physical reference rather than the social reference. During this transaction between the two, not only Muslims change under the current European tendencies, but Europe also changes by Muslims' identities simply because Muslims personalize their places (homes, neighborhood, city or town) according to their cultural beliefs so that these places reflect and communicate who they are.

The Islamic identity is strongly conferred to the religious institutions. The term ''Muslim'' indicates an identity-something we attach to ourselves to define who we are. But it is generally conferred upon us. To ask about the future of the identity ''Muslim,'' therefore, is to raise questions not so much about individuals as about social institutions. The likelihood of ''Muslim'' having any place in the Western world depends, then, on the continuing power of the religious institutions (including mosque, civic associations, Islamic schools), to confer this identity. The religious institutions confer a Muslim identity and focus on the challenges presented in each of these areas: the religious institutions as a community of memory, the religious institutions as denomination, and the religious institutions as supportive communities.

Mosques and other Islamic organizations are very important place for Muslims for the process of 'self-categorization' because among community members Muslims positively see themselves and also regard themselves and their group in relation to other groups which brings strength to them (Reicher and Hopkins 2001). However, it also important to know the difference of what different group memberships mean for Muslims. Therefore, in this part we will look at mosques as a place of memory and history of Muslim community.

Increasing Mosques as a Reminder of Muslim Presence in EU

Muslims attach their religious and spiritual, even ethnic identities to the mosques and other religious institutions. According to a report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more Muslims attend mosque regularly. A 2005 survey found that about 80 percent of Muslims in London say they attend mosque regularly. For instance, the East London mosque in Tower Hamlets attracts thousands of worshippers on the high holidays and Friday sermons. The old Central Mosque of London accommodates about 4000 prayers with its current marvelous design with a golden dome. According to a study by the British-based Christian Research, this number is growing day by day and the number of Muslims praying at British mosques will be double the number of churchgoers by 2040. In 2004, 930,000 Muslims out of three million Muslims in the country attended the mosque services (Telegraph on Sunday, September 4, 2005). It is no surprise that the number of mosques grew from 13 in 1963 to 338 by 1985 (Vertovec 2002). There were about 400 mosques in the UK. Many existing mosques are also being refurbished and enlarged (Gledhill 2007). Now there are about 250 mosques in Sweden, 150 in Denmark, 400 in the Netherlands and probably 1,500 in Britain.

The other European countries also witness the increase in attendance of Muslims in mosques despite the high expenses to build and maintain mosques. Munich's mosque, for instance, was built at a cost of $1.5 million - half of it raised by Munich's 50,000 Muslims. Amsterdam's $5 million mosque functions not only as a religious, cultural and social center for the city's 40,000 Muslims, but also as a headquarters for the 200,000 Muslims living in The Netherlands and accommodates 900 worshippers, but can be extended - by removing partitions separating the adjoining auditorium, gymnasium and courtyard - to accommodate 3,400 people. It is designed to illustrate the heritage of traditional Islamic architecture but at the same time manifest Islam's dynamic attitude to the present. Tariq Modood, a professor of sociology at Bristol University, has found that 62 per cent of Muslims pray in places of worship.

Due to high expenses and maintenance of Islamic institutions Muslim countries try to support Muslims in EU. For instance, some biggest mosques in Europe were funded by Saudi Arabia. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia contributed over $1m to its construction in the 1980s (Klausen 2004). King Faisal of Saudi Arabia helped build the mosque in Rome, which serves Italy's estimated 500,000 Muslims and also helped obtain the necessary approval for building the mosque and his successor contributed over half the $20 million needed for construction (Scarfiott 1978).

Muslims sometimes also use the church buildings as a place of worship. In Great Britain, approximately 250 temporary mosques are considered converted houses and halls and used as places of worship along with disused Christian churches and, in London's East End, a derelict synagogue. London's new central mosque, which attracts

many because of its handsome structure, complements the nearby 19th-century residences called the Nash terraces (Gibson 1975).

Although, it is very hard to prove the hypothesis that Muslim attendance in mosques outnumbers the Christian attendance in churches, simply because mosques usually do not keep registers of Muslim attendance, but the increase of mosques and the Muslim population in Europe can ultimately lead to the growing influence of Muslims in Europe.

Mosques as Communities of Memories

The importance of mosques in Muslim identity in EU is related to two important factors: first, the conception of community of memory and second, the second pillar of Islam, prayer.

In ''Habits of the Heart'', Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1986) suggest that part of a genuine, sustaining community is a strong conception of the past as provided by a community of memory and we desperately need in our otherwise individualistic society. The Islamic religious institutions such as mosques, *tariqahs*, etc., along with neighborhoods and groups, are important communities of memory and a place, which sustain this memory. However, the authors of *Habits* give the impression that individualism simply leaves people without communities of memory, which is hard to apply to the Islamic institutions.

The communities of memory are essential to the formation of an identity of individual Islamic institutions where tradition is important and opposed to detached rationality with particular force. As MacIntyre (1998) suggested, identity conferred by social institutions that any conception of moral action must be accompanied by sociology of the same and communities of memory and individual identities are linked. Moreover, a living tradition in Islamic institutions is a historically extended and socially embodied argument, which is about the goods that constitute that tradition. Within this kind of a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, sometimes through many generations. Hence Muslims' search for their good in community is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part (MacIntyre 1998). In this regard, Muslims should not be perceived within the framework of individualism, which leaves people without communities of memory, instead must be perceived within their communities and their personal narratives always depend on a sense of history and tradition.

Variations emerge when Muslims constitute different traditions. For instance, as Abd-Allah (2003) mentioned, ''Muslims from North Africa combine elements of the native Roman basilica with Visigothic elements like the horseshoe arch like the mosques in Spain, while Muslims from East and West Africa incorporate an African

spirit in their mosques.'' Turkish mosques are very well-known with the lofty domed structures and basic outlay of indigenous Greek churches along with pencil-thin, obelisk-like minarets based on native Anatolian themes. Chinese Muslims incorporate ancient Chinese symbolism of the sacred in their mosques, while the mosques of Indian Muslims blend Indian and Persian cultural elements in mosques.

Therefore, in considering Islamic institutions as communities of memory, therefore, we must ask how our personal narratives depend on a sense of a history and tradition, how strong this tradition will be and what goods it will convey in Islamic institutions, which are very diverse and present different cultures. It is due to this fact that an increasing percentage of Western Muslims are not being raised in religious institutions, or if they are, they are not being reared in the religious institutions of their ancestors, and are probably not attending religious institutions that their children will attend and the other sources of a rich narrative tradition - families, ethnic groups, residential communities - are also subject to the growing pressures of change. In other words, memory is being emphasized because memory is increasingly problematic in the Muslim community in West.   Therefore, the memory-preserving function gains relative importance and retaining the identity ''Muslim'' depends on it. If the Islamic religious institutions function as a community of memory and their actual historic links are being weakened, then their special mission to preserve the past, to carry on a tradition will not be successful enough to preserve the Muslim identity.

The second important factor in increase of mosques in EU is related to the second obligation of Islam, which is the prayer. Muslims cannot imagine the prayer without a mosque. Such an attitude has been well proved with the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. The Prophet Muhammad's first act was to build of a mosque wherever he stayed in order to fulfill the congregational Friday prayer. The Prophet Muhammad advised the building of mosques in a simple style, so that there should be no dissipation or dilution of the true religious and spiritual atmosphere. The Qur'an also emphasizes on importance of the mosques in Muslims' lives: ''In the houses, which Allah has permitted to be exalted and that His name may be remembered in them, there glorify Him therein in the mornings and evenings'' (the Qur'an, 24:36). Besides the five daily obligatory prayers, there is a weekly Friday prayer (*jum'a*) offered in mosques, which is compulsory for Muslim men and optional for Muslim women. In practice and content, the Friday prayer is like any other prayer except a large number of Muslims attend a *khutbah* (sermon), which is about the religious guidance and preached by the Imam before the prayers begin. The Friday sermon usually reminds worshippers of their accountability to God, the characteristics of a Muslim, and conduct in society. In this way, the Friday sermon refreshes the memory on religious commitments. For Muslims, the congregational prayers and the Friday and *Eid* (holiday) prayers are strong examples of the nature of the Muslim community and in

the unity of their opinions and goals. Mosques are also used for social gatherings, like wedding ceremonies, funeral services, courts of law, and other religious ceremonies.

Thus, mosques carry a great social and spiritual place in the lives of the Muslims. The mosque is the place where Muslims unite and establish common efforts. The mosque shows the permanence of the Muslim presence in Europe and their strength and cohesiveness. However, ''houses of worship have a high symbolic value in Europe, and the cathedral or church is usually the centre of town. As Riem Spielhaus, an expert on Islam in Europe at Berlin's Humboldt University, puts ''mosques are therefore seen as a symbol for the presence of foreigners''.[1] Through the building of mosques, Europeans also realize that they are not alone in their country and the changes have been made in the society.

Mosques as Multi-functional Institutions

At contemporary time, the effectiveness of Muslims' commitment to EU is highly linked to the environments, including Islamic institutions, which constitute different traditions and their ability to function in the context of EU. However, one important factor is also related to the skills of Muslim clergy, i.e. imams and Muslim scholars.

Muslims in Europe need imams and scholars who speak the languages and are familiar with the customs and practices of the countries in which they live but the other problem is that in many cases, the leaders or imams in the Islamic institutions do not well serve or represent Muslims because of their being less skilled in expressing the complicated views and concerns of Muslims, particularly young Muslim generations. As Lord Nazir Ahmed (2001), a member of Britain's House of Lords, wrote: ''Young British Muslims go to the mosque and hear an imam delivering a sermon in a foreign language about the past. It has no relevance to... the problems affecting Muslims in Britain. At the same time, it fills them with absurd notions about the British. They leave the mosque feeling angry and confused and walk straight into the arms of extremist groups such as *al-Muhajiroun* (immigrants) which talk to them in a language they understand.''

Moreover, the basic values of liberal, Western democracies are misinterpreted as something against Islam. There is a tendency that the Muslim clergy who come from Muslim countries may preserve ''traditional Islam'' well from the outside influence. Therefore, in many cases, different Muslim governments fund the imams in the mosques in Europe. For instance, the *Diyanet*, directorate of religious affairs of the Turkish government, is the main source of many Turkish mosques in Europe, except in Britain, and regulates the operation many mosques, employs local and provincial imams, and supplies imams - or *hojas* - to Turkish communities residing abroad. Such imams rarely speak the local language but they tend to be educated and do not

---

[1] More Muslims, More Mosques in Europe, *Today's Zaman, 24 September 2007.*

politicize.[2] One of the biggest differences between Turkish imams and the imams from other Muslim countries is that they are more liberal or moderate and tend to be bridge between the home country and home of residence.[3]

A large number of European imams come from abroad simply because the European governments never funded the local training of imams among those who are European citizens or within the immigrant community. A small portion of imams in Europe are trained at their own expense and travel to Islamic universities in Egypt or Saudi Arabia or Turkey to become Islamic scholars or imams.

The big issue around imams is that, some young people complain that the older community and religious leaders who claim to represent the British Muslims, for instance, fail to articulate the experiences of the young and ignore the possibility that young people of all communities are able to represented as community leaders (DCLG 2009). Ritchie (2001: 13) blamed the community leaders in failing to be in 'integration' with mainstream institutions such as police, intelligence, etc. Cantle (2002: 19) argued that it is necessary for '… the minority, largely non-white community, to develop a greater acceptance of, and engagement with, the principal national institutions' and recommended redefining in order to '… specifically tackle the problem of the provision of mono-cultural community facilities in exchange for political allegiance from specific communities' (Cantle 2002: 19).

The lack of the local imams in the European mosques is highly related to the employment standards in the Islamic institutions, which do not offer a job contract, pension and a regular salary. This problem has already raised as an important issue how to afford the training of imams and other religious leaders in West because native-born clergy will have a better understanding of Western society and more skill in relating to non-Muslims. For instance, British government proposed a law that would be a requirement for all Muslim preachers to pass an English-language and cultural test. Spain and France took measurements to control over the funding of mosques and monitor the sermons delivered in the religious institutions. The French government started to fund the courses in the Catholic Institute of Paris to train Muslim clerics together with the Paris Mosque in order to broaden of Muslim clerics' understanding of France's legal, historical, and social mores. The target of the French government is to shape a French Islam that is in touch with society (Bryant 2008). In Denmark, state broadcasters allowed for the first time a Muslim woman co-hosting a television talk show to wear a headscarf. Or the British government supported the attempts of the Muslim College in London, the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicestershire to address the issue of local training for British imams. All these institutions are non-

---

[2] On Diyanet see in detail Yilmaz 2005.

[3] For Turkish understanding of Islam, Islamism, secularism-democracy-Islam relations see in detail Yilmaz 2002, Yilmaz 2005, Yilmaz 2009a, Yilmaz 2009b.

sectarian and focus on the importance of critical skills and of relating beliefs and practices to the British context. Inter-faith dialogue, mosque administration, and social studies are part of the curriculum.   Some British universities are also part of this process. For instance, the Birbeck College of University of London, Loughborough University, etc. work in collaboration with the Muslim College and the Markfield Institute of Higher Education.

Muslim religious authorities interpreted these measurements differently. Mansur Escudero, president of Spain's Islamic Council criticized the governments for an attack on a religious freedom, however, Mustafa al-Mrabet, the country's Moroccan Immigrant Workers Association, on the other hand, justified them by claiming that Saudi-sponsored imams spread Wahhabi vision of Islam contradicts with the European values (Chicago Tribune, 2004). The adherents of the later idea quote examples of those mosques and the imams who preach in them became under a cloud of suspicion after the 9/11 attacks. For instance, Mohammed Atta, one of the 9/11 terrorists, attended the al-Quds mosque in Hamburg or Richard Reid, the shoe bomber, had links with the Finsbury Park mosque in north London. The militant Islamic cleric Sheikh Abu Hamza was evicted from Britain preached in the Finsbury Park mosque. The five among the eight young British Muslims from the suburbs of southeast England were arrested on suspicion of involvement in a bomb plot and had been linked to Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammed, a leader of the radical al-Muhajiroun group, which claims about 800 adherents in Britain (Klausen, 2004, see also Yilmaz 2008, Yilmaz 2009c). Thus, the main fear of politicians and leaders of Muslim communities in Europe is fear of Imams who preach holy war.

Thus, the maintenance of mosques in EU is not an easy task and forces Muslim community to receive funding from Muslim governments, which then may impose their ideology on Muslims in EU. This factor reduces the effectiveness of mosques as national institutions in EU.

Conclusion

Mosques represent an important element of Muslim identity. This identity may be social, political, personal, etc., and depends on language they speak, attitudes they have, place where they live in, and activities they enjoy to do. In this regard, mosques manifest gender, ethnic, social class, religion, and culture dimensions of Muslim identity.

Many criticize the increase of mosques in EU not because they see Muslims as a threat but because a large number of European imams come from abroad (see Yilmaz 2008, Yilmaz 2009c). This is not Muslims' fault only because the European governments never funded the local training of imams among those who are European citizens or within the immigrant community. Therefore, the clergy trained abroad

constitute a large percentage of the employees of the mosques. However, as a place of community of memory mosques play the memory-preserving function for Muslim generations and retain the identity ''Muslim.'' To make this place an adobe of peace for Muslim generations, Muslim clergy take an advantage of government funded programs in order to broaden their understanding of legal, historical, and social mores of European society.

European mosques combine the traditions of the worshippers with those of their new environment. Muslims' attachment to Europe grows and they start to identify themselves with their places in Europe. During this transaction between the two, not only Muslims change under the current European tendencies, but Europe also changes by Muslims' identities. This becomes more evident in increasing number of mosques in EU and the debate about its place in EU life.

References

Abd-Allah, U. F. (2003) ''Islam and the Cultural Imperative'', *The Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*, 89

Bellah, Robert et al. (1986). *Habits of the Heart.* Soundings

Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team,* London: Home Office.

DCLG (Department ofr Cummonties and Local Government, UK) (2002) *Building Cohesive Communities*, London: HMSO

Gibson, H. (1975) ''A Mosque for Regent's Part'', *Aramco World.* May-June Issue.

Gledhill, R. (2007) ''Thousands of Churches Face Closure in Ten Years, *The Times*, 10 February 2007.

Klausen, J. (2004) ''Counterterrorism and the Integration of Islam in Europe'', *Watch on the West,* Vol. 7, No. 1.

Reicher, S. D. and Hopkins, N. (2001) *Self and Nation: Categorization, Contestation and Mobilisation.* London: Sage

Ritchie, D. (2001) *Oldham Independent Review,* http://www.oldhamir.org.uk/press/ accessed at 05 April 2009.

Scarfiott, G.L. (1978). A Mosque For Rome. *Aramco World.* September-October Issue.

Vertovec, S. (2002) ''Islamophobia and Muslim Recognition in Britain'', in *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*, Yvonne Haddad (Ed.), New York: Oxford University Press, . 19-35

Viorst, M. (1996) ''The Muslims of France'', *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (5), 78-119.

Yilmaz, I. (2002) 'Secular Law and the Emergence of Unofficial Turkish Islamic Law', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 113-131.

Yilmaz, I. (2005) ''State, Law, Civil Society and Islam in Contemporary Turkey'', *The Muslim World*, vol.55, 2005, pp. 385-411.

Yilmaz, I. (2008) ''Predicament and Prospects in Uzbek Islamism: A Critical Comparison with the Turkish Case'', *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 23-57.

Yilmaz, I. (2009a) ''Muslim Democrats in Turkey and Egypt: Participatory Politics as a Catalyst'', *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 11, No.2, pp. 93-112.

Yilmaz, I. (2009b) ''Influence of Pluralism and Electoral Participation on the Transformation of Turkish Islamism'', *Journal of Economic and Social Research*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 43-65.

Yilmaz, I. (2009c) ''An Islamist Party, Constraints, Opportunities and Transformation to Post-Islamism: The Tajik Case'', *International Law and Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 18, 133-147.