

Version 230521 PDF

2 Islam Today: Muslims in Western Europe

Introduction

In order to explore the roots of Muslim communities in the UK, it is helpful to first provide an overview of the relevant factors within the wider European and 'western' context. Defining 'the west' and 'western contexts' raises a number of semantic issues, some of which are discussed in the *Orientalism* section of this module.



outside Jamme Masjid, Brick Lane, London (photo: Gary R. Bunt)

Islam Today in European Contexts

When discussing Islam and Muslims in ‘contemporary Western contexts’, the construction of a single model is difficult or even unnecessary. For example, in Western Europe (which can be defined in different ways), Muslims have diverse ethnic and ‘Islamic’ identities. There may be no communications links between or even within different ‘communities’, whose apparent homogeneity as seen from the ‘outsider’ perspective may betray the sophisticated and complex myriad of identities perceived on the ‘inside’ – as represented by issues such as culture, class, language, age, and religious affiliation (if any). There can be considerable cultural and religious differences between and within communities. Locating consensus of opinion between Muslims in Europe can raise many difficulties on *some* issues. There is no single organisational entity offering dialogue between different groups. Not every Muslim in Europe *would want* to be subject to a single authoritative body, especially if it was dictating interpretative agenda.

Discussions on Muslims in western contexts can focus on a wide range of areas, in different contexts: racism, religious freedom, censorship, ‘fundamentalism’, assimilation/integration, human rights, and legalistic interpretations(s) of ‘Islam’ are common themes.

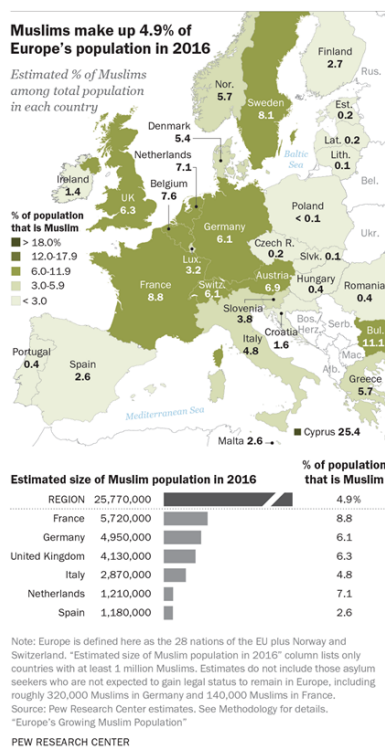
There can be a common subtext, that Islam is perceived as not belonging in ‘the West’ - a problematic theory on historical, scientific, legal and moral grounds:

- *historically*, Muslims thrived in Spain from 711-1492 (whilst no means a ‘golden age’, it was an influence on European development and culture);
- *scientifically*, ‘western’ theories of knowledge were often stimulated by Muslim innovations (who should control knowledge?);
- *legally*, through Charters including the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (binding, in some EU countries, where it forms part of constitutions);

- *morally*, for example, through edicts encouraging religious and ethnic tolerance - such as *Vatican II*.

The focus in this section is on 'Western Europe' - which itself is not a single entity and can be viewed in a variety of ways: perhaps geographically, linguistically, culturally, politically, historically, and/or economically. Different 'representational' bodies can have different perspectives on Muslims in Western Europe. Claims of pan-European representation from bodies such as the European Union (EU) can be challenged by Eastern European states.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has endeavoured to produce an international statistical breakdown on a country-by-country basis.¹ Take a look at their graphics which provide indicative figures (2016):



There is a detailed breakdown of these figures in the *Journal of Religion and Demography*.²

Efforts have been made to determine religious affiliation through analysis of 'countries of origin' - although such data may become progressively less important as European-born generations become further established. There is also the minor (statistical) 'problem' of converts.

The three largest groups also represent three significant divisions of Muslims:

- in France, the majority are of North African origin;
- in Germany Muslims are primarily of Turkish ethnic origin;

- in the UK, the majority have Indian sub-continent origins.

This means that there can be considerable religious diversity: generally, between these three bands, and also within the bands themselves. Mention should also be made of the class distinctions within these groups, often betraying urban or rural origins, as well as economic and social status indicators.

Whilst there are pan-European Muslim organisations, their influence appears limited, especially when Muslim organisations at national levels have been generally unsuccessful at creating a consensus platform for discussions of Inter Faith dialogues. It would be incorrect to 'write off' such organisations, which are very much at the developmental stages. Some believe that, once Muslims become better established (after several generations?), a pan-European Islamic representative body could have a role to play in Europe. Some commentators believe that members and/or factions of Muslims in Britain could be the most influential in Europe - and cite their role following the *Satanic Verses* controversy.³ Whilst this argument has certain merits, no doubt Muslims in France and Germany would have different opinions.

Whilst the majority of European Muslim communities emerged after World War Two, reference should be made to the presence of a long-established Muslim (Turkish) presence in Greece (a nation which had a larger Muslim presence before population exchanges with Turkey after 1923). There have also been Muslim communities in Britain for over a century (for example, in Cardiff, Liverpool, London, and the North East of England), and France. European nationals (and their representatives) have engaged in diplomatic, trade and military dialogues with Muslims on a regular basis since the sixteenth century.

Migration Patterns

European Union (EU) research provided one indicator of trends in population movements, given that alternative 'non-partisan' statistics did not exist, during critical phases of societal development. Non-EU migrants (including Muslims) often

- bore the burdens of society
- did not receive social benefits
- lived in cheap housing
- operated within clandestine labour markets
- lived within a social hierarchy dominated by fellow countrymen/co-religionists with a longer history of settlement.

Many migrants of non-EU origins (and their descendants) saw lack of decent housing as their greatest grievance, rather than the hostility of 'natives'. A lack of information, incapacity to cope with administration, lack of State Aid, and limited access to financial channels are all perceived as grievances. The experiences of Muslims in Britain are reflected in the experiences of other European Muslims, and the EU discussions reflected to

an extent Muslims in Britain at the time of writing these reports. Non-migrant origin Europeans may also share some of these problems.

There was a population flow from Southern Mediterranean Europeans northwards, into the 'European Megalopolis' - whose boundaries encompass London, Lyon, Munich, and Copenhagen. This pattern resulted in a 'replacement' population emerging from other Mediterranean countries. This included a high proportion of Muslims. There were certain variable factors with regard to this population mobilisation, for example seasonal migrations.

It has been estimated that the one million North Africans living and working in the EU during the 1970s doubled in the 1990s. The figure of 650,000 Turkish nationals working in the EU in 1973 increased to two million.

With the dissolution of the Communist bloc, greater attention was placed on this new 'threat' to Western Europe. Pieterese discusses a border-zone developing between the EU and its southern, Mediterranean neighbours:

"... a European Mexico syndrome - a border zone where economic, political, cultural, religious and democratic differences accumulate to create a gap between worlds, a zone of confrontation."⁴

The *European Convention on Human Rights and its Five Protocols* (1950) [related to the *UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948)] was one reference point, when discussing Muslim communities in the West. Relevant articles included:

- Article 6: determining civil rights
- Article 9: concerning 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion'
- Article 14: opposing discrimination.

Asylum

It is important to distinguish immigration from asylum issues; in the latter, physical safety and lives can be at risk, not just economic well-being. The migration of Bosnian Muslims; Kurds from Iraq, and Kuwaiti and Iraqi nationals fleeing Saddam Hussein; Iranians escaping from post-Revolutionary changes; West Africans, Afghans, Bangladeshis (from former east Pakistan), Kashmiris and Pakistanis seeking refuge from civil war; Syrians and Iraqis escaping conflict - all are examples of Muslim individuals believing it was possible to find safety in the UK. However, refugees and asylum seekers were refused entry, as governments sought to tighten access - for those who would have been entitled to entry before. There is also a 'grey area', of asylum seekers who do not show on official statistics.

It is helpful to reflect on some of the past trends in relation to asylum issues. In 2001, the most prominent nationalities of asylum seekers emerging from

Muslim contexts into the UK (although the countries contain populations with other religious minorities) were:

	2001 ⁵	2002 ⁶
Afghanistan	9,190	7,380)
Iraq	6,805	14,940)
Somalia	6,500	6,680)
Turkey	3,740	2,890)
Iran	3,450	2,685)
Pakistan	2,810	2,440)

Using the same criteria, the most prominent countries of origin for refugees in the EU in 2001 were

Afghanistan	37,429
Iraq	41,249
Somalia	9,929
Turkey	27,312
Iran	11,999
Algeria	8,908
Bosnia	8,778 ⁷

Any discussion of population should also incorporate analysis of asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrant movements, which include proportions of people identifying as Muslim. For example, citizens of 141 countries sought asylum for the first time in the EU in the second quarter of 2015. Syrians, Afghanis and Albanians were the top 3 citizenships of asylum seekers, lodging around 44,000, 27,000 and 17,700 applications respectively.⁸ These population groupings would include substantial Muslim numbers. The situation in Iraq and Syria with the emergence of 'Islamic State' was to lead to major movements of people into Europe.⁹ After the fall of Kabul in 2021, further migrations were anticipated. The issue of migration, anti-Muslim prejudice and Islam continues to be a live political issue, which impacts on generations of Muslims established in European contexts, as well as more recently configured communities.

ACTIVITY (not assessed)

Check out the latest European migration figures and flows, and consider how they impact on existing Muslim populations in European contexts.

See: [Eurostat, Migration and migrant population statistics](#)

Negative Reactions to the Presence of Muslim Communities

Manifestations of prejudice that focused on Muslims in the EU were based specifically on religious prejudice, although there was a crossover with other forms of prejudice (for example, ethnic, cultural and/or racial prejudice). Muslim communities have been one focus of so-called 'right wing' extremist groups. Many incorporate: fascist, fascist, paramilitary, nationalistic, xenophobic, 'extremist' elements based on hatred and/or fear of non-nationals/ethnic minorities/different religions. This is often based on a pseudo-scientific rationale, and occasionally garbed as 'legitimate politics.' The development of these groups is not only a cause of concern for ethnic and religious minorities - but for individuals and groups across the political spectrum. One example that has impacted on Muslims in France was that of the *Front National* of France. There have been other examples of far-right anti-Muslim activities in Germany. However, forms of prejudice are not the preserve of so-called 'extremists', and Muslims have witnessed to many different forms of (what they perceive to be) discrimination and prejudice based around their religious beliefs and practices. Some of these issues will be discussed in relation to the UK. Such prejudice negates the presence of Muslims in long-standing communities across Europe in general, including in Greece, Bosnia, Serbia and Albania.

Concluding Point

This section seeks to introduce issues associated with the establishment of Muslim communities in European contexts post World War Two, while recognising the present of long-standing communities. Statistical information can be relevant when responding to the assessment assignments. It can be helpful to reflect on different phases of migrations, and the differentials within countries and regions in terms of issues and responses. The post-Brexit context does not negate recognition that there is a connection between communities in the UK and Europe, in terms of shared issues and debates, even though there are important differentials too. These are explored in later sections of this module. Readers may want to selectively look at the suggested sources below for more insights and depth, or to focus down on a specific zone of interest.

Islam Today in European Contexts

Further Reading

Links go through to UWTSD Library Resources

1. [Bassam Tibi, Ethnicity of Fear? Islamic Migration and the Ethnicization of Islam in Europe, Studies in ethnicity and nationalism, 2010-04, Vol.10 \(1\), p.126-157 \(electronic resource\)](#)
2. [Todd Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West*. Fortress Press, 2015.](#)
3. [Islamic Human Rights Commission, *Environment of Hate: The New Normal for Muslims in the UK*, 2015.](#)
4. [Ian Law, A. Easat-Daas, A. Merali & S. Sayyid \(editors\). *Countering Islamophobia in Europe \(1st ed. 2019.\)*. Springer International Publishing.](#)

¹ Pew Research Center, Europe's Growing Muslim Population, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/> 29 November 2017

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, The Future of the Global Muslim Population, <http://features.pewforum.org/muslim-population/> September 2010

² [Conrad Hackett et al, Projections of Europe's Growing Muslim Population under Three Migration Scenarios, *Journal of Religion and Demography* 6 \(2019\) 87-122.](#) (links to PDF)

³ Tariq Modood, "British Asian Muslims and the Rushdie Affair," *Political Quarterly* 61(2) April 1990.

⁴ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Fictions of Europe", *Race & Class* No.32 Vol.3 1991

⁵ Refugee Council, Asylum Statistics 2001, http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/downloads/stats/summary_2001.pdf

⁶ Estimated figures. UNHCR, Information and Briefings, <http://www.unhcr.org.uk/info/briefings/statistics/index.html>, citing Home Office, 'Home Office Asylum Statistics, 4th Quarter 2002', <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/asylumq401.pdf>

⁷ European Council on Refugees and Exiles, EU Asylum Facts, <http://www.ecre.org/factfile/realfacts.shtml> (citing Population Data Unit, UNHCR, Geneva)

⁸ For example, see Eurostat, Asylum Quarterly Report, http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report

⁹ BBC News, 'Asylum Claims in Europe 2015', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34131911>