Is there a Muslim minority in Europe?

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Introduction

During the last two decades, questions concerning Muslim communities in Europe have been high on the agendas of both the European public opinion and researchers. The on-going public and political debate has brought scholars to lead thorough researches on this question. Thus, since the end of 1980's, “Muslims in Europe” have become one of the main topics of social and political sciences.

The interest for Muslim communities in Western and Eastern Europe has different roots. In Western Europe, Muslims are still seen by the public opinion as “Migrants”, i.e. foreigners. In Eastern Europe, nevertheless, they constitute old minorities. In both parts of Europe, however, the question has recently gained interest.

There are two main reasons for this increasing interest. It is related, on the one side, to the “image” of Muslims and Islam brought by violent actions linked to Islam. The events of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington DC; number of similar terrorist attacks such as those in Madrid and London; the assassination of Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004; or the cartoons crises in Denmark in September 2005: all created a heavy climate in which Muslims, in the European view, became assimilated to “danger”.

However, the main reason for the need to understand these Muslim communities is not terrorist attacks. The end of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century have witnessed the birth of a new generation of European Muslims. These Muslims were born on European soil and have socialized and been educated in the Western European countries. Despite a discourse on communitarianism, these generations are in strong interaction with the majority society and consequently their concerns are “European”. The debates on European Islam show that subjects which pervades the European public opinion, also belong to the agenda of young Muslim intellectuals who want to create a European identity in conformity with Muslim norms, and an Islamic identity in conformity with European values.

Which Europe?

The title of this article contains three terms and all of three are problematic. If we start by the end, we must first examine the concept of Europe. What kind of Europe are we talking about? Is Europe a "civilizational", political, institutional or geographic entity? Are we talking about Europe of the Council of Europe with its 47 members from Iceland to Russia through Turkey and Eastern Europe or about Europe of the European Union, with 28 members excluding not only Turkey but also other European "Muslim" countries as Bosnia or Albania?

It is clear that even if we take the institutional Europe sensu stricto, in other words, the EU-28, there is a large sociological, legal and economic disparity between Muslim communities in Western Europe and those in Eastern Europe.
Above all, in Eastern Europe, Muslim communities have a “traditional presence” as relics of the multi-religious empires that were Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empire. Therefore, these Muslims are not considered as aliens in the countries where they live, especially since their members have often, if not always, the citizenship of the country and a number of these communities are legally recognized as minorities. The best examples are the Muslim minority in Bulgaria and that of Greece, both members of the European Union. Although the presence of these minorities is still complex in the Bulgarian and Greek definitions of Nation, they have a legitimacy of existence in the eyes of public opinion and politicians and may not, except in case of war, be threatened with expulsion!

Things are different in Western Europe, where the presence of Muslims is considered, rightly or wrongly, as the result of migrations. Therefore, these Muslims are still perceived as foreign elements therefore not part of the legitimate society. They are at best a “question” for the States, if not a “problem.” This confusion between Muslim communities and migrations is now obsolete since the vast majority of Muslims living in countries such as Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, are not only born in the country of residence and socialized in these countries, but in addition, they have the citizenship of these countries. Therefore, these groups cannot be considered as migrants or foreigners. However there is also a difficulty to qualify them as "minorities" as we shall see below.

Who are these Muslims?

The second problematic concept in the title of this paper is “Muslims”. The problem of defining Muslims in Europe stems from two facts.

Firstly: even though some European countries have a long history of Muslim presence, Muslims in Europe are still “minority groups”, numerically speaking, which are being and have been described mainly by the majorities. Legally speaking, among the Muslims in Europe, some groups can be defined as “minorities”, some can not.

Secondly: concepts such as identity, ethnicity, religion, culture and nationality are ambiguous and dependent on relational issues. In addition, these are dynamic concepts vertically (in the time) and horizontally (in different contexts). Particularly, when it comes to describe minority groups, it is difficult, if not impossible, to describe them wholly adequately, because the very wish to do so relates to the asymmetrical power relationship between majority and minority.

In short: it is empirically relevant for scholars to recognize the fact that the way that we describe Muslim minority groups in Europe does not necessarily correspond with how these groups think about and understand themselves – nor do they necessarily think about themselves as ‘Muslims’ but might have other and intertwining categories to describe themselves.

When majorities define (and thereby identify) ‘Muslims’ in Europe, this expresses a categorization of ‘a group’, which can be distinguished from other groups by virtue of its ‘Muslimness’, but naturally, all Muslims are not... Muslims, religiously speaking. Here, the category of Muslim means “belonging” and has nothing to do with Belief or Muslim behaviour. Some, but not all, of the members of the minority groups of ‘Muslims’ fit into the scholarly understanding of what it means to be a ‘Muslim’ and belong to a group of which we define as ‘Muslims’. Some ‘Muslims’ might not think about themselves as distinctly ‘Muslim’ but rather in ethnic, national or cultural terms or, for example, a mixture of ethnic and religious terms while others entirely identify themselves as ‘Muslims’ and actively articulate the Muslim identity as separate from their ethnic/national identity.

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Another central issue is defining Muslims in (opposing?) categories of ‘practicing/observing Muslims’ vs. ‘cultural/nominal’ Muslims because this can also vary a great deal depending on the specific context. The categories themselves are ambivalent because they are often used as opposites and as such, used politically to distinguish between ‘good’ (‘non-practicing and therefore secular and integrated/assimilated’) and ‘bad’ (‘practicing therefore fundamentalist’) Muslims.

When it comes to describing Muslims, it is relevant not to make matters of practice the only standard description because it is possible to self-identify strongly as a ‘Muslim’ while not observing fast or participating in any Islamic rituals. Although many Muslims will be adequately described as either ‘practicing’ or ‘cultural’, this does not mean that matters of practice do not necessarily involve self-identification as a Muslim.

The self-identification as ‘Muslim’ can correlate with other issues than the practice level. It can express attitudes towards the majority; other ethnic and national groups and it can be related to gaining minority rights as a ‘group’. Likewise, we cannot presume that the Muslim identity is equally important in all situations. A so called ‘practicing Muslim’ or a ‘cultural Muslim’ is not confined to being just that at all times – depending on the context, it can be relevant for a cultural Muslim to accentuate his or her religious identity while a practicing Muslim might choose to tone down his or her religious identity or vice versa.

And above all: ‘Muslims’ have other identities as mothers, fathers, students, or professional identities, Turks, Tartars and Lebanese, or… Lithuanian, British… etc. as well which are not necessarily detached, i.e. self-understood separately from being ‘Muslims’ but might very well be understood as intrinsic elements in what it means to be ‘Muslim’.

To be Muslim can be equivalent to being Turk or Arab. In halal business, some halal products are only ethnic products or everyday life objects. In France one can buy Hallal salt i.e. from Turkey! Particularly in Western Europe where some of the third and fourth generation immigrants with Muslim background are articulating senses of global Islam and the Muslim umma, it is important to constantly evaluate and check the reality of categories which we use to describe these groups.

In addition to these points, the concept of “Muslims” is covering a very large and differentiated context, which have very different histories, populations, different political systems and thereby also very different ways of counting or not counting ‘Muslims’. In some countries, such as Denmark and France, it is illegal to register people with regard to their religion while in other countries it is voluntary for people to register as ‘Muslims’ for the national census.

All this does not mean that Muslim groups are vague and indefinable concepts, which can only be grasped theoretically, but only that one needs to demarcate very carefully what one means, when describing Muslims:

1. Definitions of any group imply categorizations per se which is problematic when studying heterogenic (minority) groups - including problems concerning insider/outsider perspectives (categorization vs. self-identification).
2. Problems with equating ‘practice’ and Muslim identity.
3. Empirical complex situation(s) with regard to differentiated European national states
4. Many studies on minority groups are conducted by majorities. This problem of representation can be reduced (but never eliminated) when the majorities and scholars a) keep the minorities perspectives (i.e. self-understandings) in mind when describing them and b) reflect critically upon that majority scholars are involved in creating the minorities and representations hereof with whatever that involves (politically, ethically etc.).
What is a minority?

Finally, the third concept used in the title is, perhaps, the most difficult one because there is not a single universal definition of the “minority”

It is very difficult to give a unanimous definition of a minority, in order to apply (or not) to the case of Muslims in Europe. Legal instruments have preferred not to give exhaustive definition in order to not excluding any particular community.

The concept of religious minority is the root of the minority concept, insofar as relations between minorities / majorities are mainly based on the perception of otherness - the religious affiliation being the first since Roman times - , and on the principle of domination - the monarchs of the Middle Ages imposing their religion on their subjects. Thus, the first minorities are religious and the first feelings of otherness are based on the religious behaviour. Therefore, we can relate the concept of a religious minority in a political sense, with the existence of a particular religious "organization".

This faith-based organization , (and I use that term with its most basic definition , i.e., the mobilization of collective actors who tend to a self- regulating religious group where people feel they have a common religion) is therefore a response from the minority to the majority. The structure of the religious minority is the only way to exist in a majority religion, which is considered dangerous, wrong and expansionist.

Thus, a situation of permanent rivalry occurs, -interspersed with temporary alliances- not only between the majority and the Muslim minority, but also between different religious minorities (and different Muslim groups) competing for legitimacy.

To highlight this sense of otherness and the resulting rivalry, we must focus on the question of the definition of a minority and a majority. Unfortunately, this is an endless debate, and no definition can satisfy each particular case.

The concept of Muslim minority may cover two areas:

From a sociological perspective, a minority is a community of individuals possessing a common sense of belonging. Their number is less than another larger community that possesses another sense of belonging. They are socially persecuted, or at least they believe to be so.

In the wider context, most minorities have two “objective” qualities: Language and faith as the two determinants of a community identity. Serge Moscovici’s “minorité nomique”2 strives to preserve these two indispensable pillars of its identity at all costs. However, in the case of minorities under the sovereignty of another culture, preserving the native language takes great effort. This is especially difficult in modern societies, where the interaction between the minority and the majority is continuous. Therefore, the minority faith, being the second pillar of the community, is prioritized as it is easier to transfer, facilitates detachment from the rest of the society and enclosure within itself, and is more discursive. The definition of the religious minority considers this second pillar that prevents the adoption of the majority culture. Based on Capotorti’s timeless definition,3 the concept of minority in general and religious minority in particular may be defined as follows:

a) Being different from the majority both by belonging to a different group and engaging in different behaviour. Contemporary documents describe these “differences” as ethnic, religious and linguistic in nature. Based on this, a minority can be defined as a subgroup surrounded by a geographically larger

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group (nation/society/community) where members of the subgroup possess qualities that are different from the surrounding larger group.⁴

b) **Being fewer in number** within the borders of a country recognized as a state. It is not important whether the minority is regionally a majority in any part of the country. While easily applicable in the case of unitary nation-states, this criterion is harder to apply in the federal case, and has a number of inherent problems. Nevertheless, almost all bilateral and multilateral international documents require a minority to reach a certain level of concentration in a given geographical region without prescribing specific numbers or percentages in order for it to benefit from specific rights. Since modern states grant the freedom of worship to all citizens without regard for geographical concentration, these specific rights are usually centred on language.

c) **Not being culturally dominant.** The concept of dominance requires definition. “Dominant majority” and “oppressed minority” carry different meanings in American and European sociology.⁵ While American sociology uses the term “minority” for all groups that feel oppressed by one or more dominant majorities by any means, the same term is used in Europe for groups that demonstrate “objective” differences that give rise to discrimination. The relations between being oppressed and being dominant are best explained in Bourdieu’s work.⁶ Regardless of the field of study, including “minorities,” the workings of the society is always based on the structural mechanisms of competition and dominance. These mechanisms are consciously or unconsciously reproduced by individuals and groups that form part of the socialization process, and become habitus that are transferred by schools and the family in particular.⁷ Therefore, dominance constitutes one of the primary criteria for being in the minority. As a result, a dominant religion cannot be construed as a minority religion even if its followers are regionally minor in number.

d) **Being citizens of the state in question.** If the individuals forming a group are not citizens, they are classified as “aliens.” Although the measure of citizenship is unanimously accepted from a legal perspective, it has some problems in practice. From a sociological point of view, there are many communities that cannot benefit from rights granted to minorities despite possessing all qualities describing a minority. Groups that constitute sociological minorities but are not citizens of the state they live in may be the result of various historical, political and sociological occurrences. There are three frequent cases: Changes of state not accompanied by the summary exile or exchange of a population, as in former Yugoslavia;⁸ forced population exchanges; and, more recently, immigration. Considering this last point, while there frequently is a legal distinction between citizens and aliens in the same immigrant communities in Europe, this distinction does not exist from a sociological perspective. From that perspective, even if a group that holds a faith different from the majority is not naturalized within the state it lives in, it should still be considered a religious minority. In practice, citizens and aliens within the same immigrant community view themselves as a part of one and the same community, and share places of worship.

e) A fifth and “subjective” measure must be added to the above four “objective” criteria: the presence of **minority consciousness.** “As social classes may not exist without class consciousness, minorities cannot exist without minority consciousness.”⁹ This consciousness may become manifest, or sometimes manufactured, by associating with a group. Sometimes, this association is dictated by the majority. In both cases, the religious minority is aware that it is a minority. Awareness of this special situa-

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⁹ Baskan Oran, Türkiye‘de Azınlıklar, Kavramlar, Teori, Lozan, İ; Mevzuat, İçtihat, Uygulama, İstanbul: İletişim, 2005, p. 26.
tion manifests itself in various ways during the identity building process. The majority that dominates this process may strive to disregard the ramifications of this consciousness or to prevent it from becoming manifest. Other countries, where the minority religion in another country is in the majority, make efforts to preserve or even encourage this consciousness. For example, influential Islamic countries strive to protect and strengthen Islam that is in minority in non-Islamic countries, while countries where Catholicism is in the majority worry about the situation of minority Catholics in Muslim countries.

Conclusion

Analysis of the three concepts in this article is clear. There is no a Muslim minority in Europe. There are groups that identify themselves as such but also identify themselves as Turks, Arabs, Bosnians ... and as women and men, and as practitioners and non-practitioners ... and as Shia or Sunni etc ... These groups are often sociological minority but rarely legally recognized as such. There are also major differences in the situation in Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe but also large differences in status between countries such as Britain or France. Therefore, the categorization of "Muslims" in Europe is useful for understanding the subject, but provided to deconstruct the category in the socio-political and historical analysis.

Last conclusion is less clear: The majority imprisons the minority in its most important difference, and refuses the individualisation of its members. As a reaction, the minority tends to protect its aspect considered under threat and danger. Nowadays, in a discursive level, that is the situation of Muslims in Europe. Actually, in social life, Muslims are not only Muslims. They are women or men, young or old, socialists or nationalists. They are Sunnis, Shi’as Alevi, believers or non-believers, conservatives of seculars. They have, like all people, multiple identities and multiple belongings. But because they feel attacked on their muslimness, they open shields on their muslimness. In that sense, yes, there is a Muslim minority in Europe.