

ISLAM IN THE WEST

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Summary Brief

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Introduction

Many scholars classify the Islamic World into six cultural zones: the Arab world; sub-Saharan Africa; the Turkish zone, including Central Asia and even central Europe; the Persian Gulf; South Asia; and Southeast Asia or the Malay zone. In the West, Muslims are creating a new cultural zone of Islam. There are three main actors in this zone: immigrant Muslims; the second generation of the immigrants; and indigenous Muslims, such as African Americans, and White or Spanish Muslims. As these three types of Western Muslims interact with each other and with the larger non-Muslim society, a new cultural zone of Islam is emerging.

Although the basic tenets of Islam are the same throughout the world, their practical manifestation varies in different regions. The basic tenet of the Islamic wedding, for example, is consent of both parties and then a contract called nikah. However, the ceremony of a Muslim wedding in South Asia contains several traditions that have been adopted from Hindu traditions, such as mehndi, mayoon and barat. Likewise, in other cultural zones, nikah is conducted through other different types of ceremonies. Since the Islamic cultural zone in the West is a new phenomenon and the Muslim traditions in the West have not fully evolved, several issues and debates are emerging there.

Being a Minority

A key issue pertains to the relatively new situation of Muslims voluntarily leaving their Muslim homelands to live as a minority in the West alongside a very large non-Muslim majority. Muslims account for about 3 percent of the population in Europe, and about 2 percent in the US, but the interesting phenomenon is that they are neither compelled to go there nor are they being subdued. Secondly, the proportion of second generation and indigenous Muslims is also growing. So, there are debates all over the West on, for example, how to live in these countries as a significant minority, what the social implications and responsibilities are, how to take part in the political process, whether the armies of those countries may be joined, and how to interact with other non-Muslim groups.

♦ This brief is based on a presentation by Dr. Zahid Bukhari, Director, American Muslim Studies Program, Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA at IPS on August 17, 2007. Prof. Khurshid Ahmed, the Chairman of IPS, presided over the session and presented the concluding remarks. The brief was prepared by Muhammad Saleem Zafar, who is a Research Coordinator at IPS.

These are some fundamental problems that the people and scholars have been discussing. Some of the scholars are talking about developing a Fiqh Akliyah (the Fiqh of Minorities), but another school of thought in the West argues that the Muslims should not live there with the mindset of a minority because the message of Islam is universal, and because a minority mindset would mean that Muslims are always on the defensive, talking about their particular rights, and thus in some ways marginalized from the mainstream. It is true that Muslims are numerically in minority, but they should be a very useful and productive part of society and spread the message of Islam while living there.

Such conceptual or theoretical issues pertaining to Muslims who choose to live in non-Muslim societies as a minority are creating a new environment, which is putting an end to the older debates about Dar al-Harb (Domain of War) and Dar al-Islam (Domain of Islam), and giving rise to new concepts, such as Dar al-Sulho (Domain of Co-existence), Dar al-Amn (Domain of Peace), Dar al-Mu'ahidah (Domain under Contract) and Dar al-Da'wah (Domain of Opportunity to reach people), and, eventually, a new fiqh (Jurisprudence). There are also debates on identity issues, such as whether Muslims should be called American Muslims or Muslim American.

The Role of the Mosque

The second characteristic of this emerging zone is the role of the mosque. In the majority of the Muslim countries, mosques are being used for prayers and Qur'anic nazrah (recitation) education. In some countries, they are administered by the awqaf (endowments) and in some; they have become very political and are used as avenues to launch protests against undemocratic regimes, deprivation and marginalization of the public.

However, in the West, and especially in the US, the mosque is assuming the new role of an Islamic Center. Due probably to insufficient space and social avenues, the Western mosque is becoming a hub of all Muslim activities, such as prayers; religious education; halqas (gatherings) of men, women, and youth; youth and sports activities; etc. Almost all major Islamic Centers have basketball courts, picnic grounds, and arrangements for indoor sports activities for youth. Sometimes, a major mosque primarily houses a gymnasium and cafeteria, mainly to attract the youth, while the 'musallah' or main prayer halls comprise a secondary part of the construction. The gymnasium may also be used for regular or Friday prayers.

Mosques in the West are also being used for political, social and economic activities. It is not unusual for church students or priests to visit the mosques at the time of Friday prayers. Muslims also invite local non-Muslim leaders, such as politicians, police inspectors or superintendents of the local Education Board. After all Friday prayers, there are usually three types of announcements concerning wrong parking and the etiquettes of parking; upcoming halqas for adults, women or

youth; and the visit of some Congressman, would-be Congressman or mayor who wishes to meet the Muslim community.

Moreover, several major Islamic centers have good dining halls and kitchens for social activities. Muslims usually like to rent these halls for weddings, engagements and birthday gatherings. The underlying idea is that the mosque should be very friendly towards the youth, women and senior citizens. Recently, in New Jersey, a mosque initiated a five-year expansion program with thirty million dollars. One of its plans is to build thirty senior citizens' homes to engage the large number of elderly Muslim people in the affairs of Islamic Centers and mosques.

Women

Another dimension of this new cultural zone is the role of Muslim women. In the subcontinent, there are some fiqhi (Jurisprudential), traditional or social issues that discourage the participation of women in Eid or Friday prayers. But in the West, it is almost impossible to imagine the absence of women in these prayers. In some mosques, women even participate in fajr (daybreak) prayers along with the men of their families. They are also becoming part and parcel of the management of Islamic centers. Mosques where women are not encouraged to participate, probably due to limitations of space or certain fiqhi instructions, are exceptions.

Almost 70 percent of mosques in America have Sunday and weekly schools and women run most of these educational activities. They are also becoming alimahs (scholars of Islam). The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) elected a Canadian converted Muslim woman, Dr. Inget Mason, who is professor of Islamic Study in Hertford Seminary, as its President in 2006. During the last three years, the National President of the Muslim Students Association (MSA), another Islamic organization in North America, has been a woman.

The Youth

There are also issues related to the Muslim youth in the West. The first generation of immigrants in these countries belongs to any of the six cultural zones mentioned earlier. They tend to exercise the traditions and habits of their own cultural zones as pure Islam onto the second generation and sometimes onto indigenous Muslims as well. Sometimes the indigenous Muslims, the African-Americans or the White Americans would like to wear Arabic dress or the South Asian shalwar and kamiz. This leads to debates of what the Islamic traditional clothes are because a seemingly Islamic tradition in one cultural zone may not necessarily be considered Islamic in another. This kind of debate is very common among youth in the West in almost every Muslim home, convention and campus. For the second generation, the basic issue is about covering the satr (Islamic dress code) and that the dress should not expose, so it holds that wearing baggy trousers and loose shirts should be considered as Islamic as shalwar kamiz or Arabic abayas.

Then, there are debates about how to find Muslim spouses; whether the parents should decide or the young people themselves, or whether there should be a combination of both, and whether an intending couple may talk to each other before their marriage/engagement.

Another issue for youth in the West concerns identity. For the first generation, it is easy to say that they are, for example, American-Muslims of Pakistani origin, but the issue of identity is obscure for the youth who are born in the West. Some people in the West tend to see Islam as a foreign phenomenon and they associate it with everything foreign; however, for the second generation and indigenous Muslims, Islam is quite indigenous.

Involvement in Social Services

After 9/11, the participation of the Muslim community in the social service sector has been growing, which is a new phenomenon. Muslims are organizing free health clinics, food drives, food for poor and other activities for the needy. The other communities have done a lot of work in this field. The American-Jewish community is running almost 600 local social service organizations and they are collecting almost four billion dollars every year in grants for different social service activities from their own community, and the city, county, state and federal governments. Catholics have two main social sector organizations. Their collective budget is more than 7 billion dollars and 62 percent of it comes from the city, counties and state and federal government. Muslims are also learning about these practices.

Mosques are, again, playing a central role in social service activities. During Ramadan, iftar parties are held in mosques. Before the month of Ramadan begins, there are notices asking Muslims of the community to register their names if they are interested in providing food for iftar on certain days. At times, there may be around 1,000–1,500 people having iftar in a mosque.

Muslims in the US have also started thinking about ways to provide food for homeless people. So iftar dinner for the homeless is becoming a permanent feature during Ramadan. On the occasion of Eid al-Adha, Muslim communities in several US cities collect the sacrificial meat for the poor and/or donate it to food-banks. The media is also used to publicize such actions.

Post-9/11 Issues

A large number of first generation Muslim immigrants used to think about going back to their homeland. However, the myth of return has been shattered today because the second generation of Muslim immigrants considers the West its own home. There is a growing feeling among Muslims in the West that their Creator will ask them about what they did where they lived and how they presented Islam in their vicinity. Although Muslims are facing quite harsh propaganda against Islam

from the media, think tanks and churches, they are also getting new opportunities to present Islam. They are entering the mainstream media in the West, which was not the case before 9/11 or 7/7. Their activities are now covered by local radio, CNN, other television channels, the New York Times, Washington Post and other major newspapers.

Another issue facing the Muslims in the West is discrimination. Before 9/11, the question “What is Islam?” was as simple as the answer — Islam is Faith — but the situation is quite different now. Muslims have to be engaged in very serious debates because non-Muslims ask serious questions and demand serious answers about the role of Islam in the affairs of state.

State and Religion

The issue of separation of Church and State has different meanings in America and Europe. According to some scholars, separation of Church and State means protecting the state from religion in Europe, and protecting religion from the state in America. Some Islamic scholars in the West are also debating the shape of the Islamic state in the context of matters such as the role of non-Muslims in an Islamic state, the issue of a Muslim leaving Islam and adopting another religion, the role of women, the act of women leading prayers, and the permissibility of different means of entertainment, like music.

In short, there is a healthy trend of sound intellectual debate on Islam in the West in which Muslim scholars are active. It is hoped that these deliberations will lead to the emergence of a very solid and productive cultural zone of Islam in the West.

Concluding Remarks

The most promising aspect of the developing Western region of Islam is that there is debate and realization that challenges have to be responded to — this is where the real hope lies for individuals, communities, and nations. Those who respond to challenges change the world, and those who refuse to take notice of challenges lapse into frustration and desperation.

The most fundamental issues Muslims in the West confront concern, firstly, the question of “Islam as a faith” and “Islam as a culture and a civilization,” and, secondly, existing as a minority.

The first issue is not new. Indeed, the distinction between Islam as a faith and Islam as a culture and civilization has been a very sensitive and important issue in the discourse on Sunnah. As they struggle to follow his example, Muslims have debated on what part of the Sunnah of their Prophet (peace be upon him [ﷺ]), especially his Aa’dah (habits) reflected the custom and traditions of his

time, as opposed to the universal practices meant to be emulated by every Muslim while considering what the value impact of Sunnah was.

The fact is that values and culture are intermingled. However, while values and customs may be amalgamated in a culture, a dissection between the two is possible and, at times, necessary. Throughout history, the advancement of Islamic culture and civilization, and the spread of Islam's geographic and cultural diversity have compelled Muslims to confront the question of institutional development under different cultural paradigms, and decide, for example, which customs have to be discarded and which may be assimilated, which institutions may be absorbed, and which modified or rejected. It is by engaging in this highly creative exercise of applying values to given situations that Muslims have evolved their fiqh. The diversity within fiqh reflects the varying ground realities of the locales where fiqh has developed, such as Madinah, Baghdad and Kufa.

This intermingling interaction between values and culture is found everywhere. Muslims are facing the same problem in a different way in America and Europe today. Customs, values, principles and traditions may not necessarily be contradictory. Nevertheless, there can be departures and variations. In this context, it has always been a salient feature of Islam that it preserves a unity in diversity, whether that diversity is vertical, i.e. in time, or horizontal, i.e. in space, and that it maintains a relationship between its values and their cultural articulations. Although the nature of the relationship is very delicate, yet there has been as well as there needs to be variety and diversity at the level of cultural expression.

Historically, the roots of this discourse go back to the advent of Islam in Persia, which was a very developed civilization; Islamization did take place there, despite the existence of differences in cultural, linguistic, historical, geographic and customary contexts. So, while there is an existence of Islam in America, Europe, and other parts of the world, there cannot be American Islam, European Islam, Pakistani Islam, or Arab or Iranian Islam.

The issue of living as a minority is also very important. Being a minority may be a demographic reality, but having a 'minority mindset' is both unnecessary and a potential calamity. Historically, minorities have played very important roles in their societies. In fact, all of human history is a contribution of minorities because minorities become majorities through an evolutionary process. A minority of people who have a faith, ideology and mission by definition should, in particular, not be obsessed with the issue of numbers. Rather, they have their own course of development, which makes their role important in every society. In contemporary European history, minorities performed a heraldic function in the development of concepts, ideologies and systems of pluralism, human rights and democracy. Some of them struggled for their own defense or survival and some might have been making those efforts because of their commitment to certain values and vision. Hence, it is not a crime, disease or disability to be a minority.

The development of the third generation of Muslims in the West is, again, a very important area to analyze. In January 2007, the UK-based think tank Policy Exchange produced a survey on the thinking of the first-, second- and third-generation Muslims in Britain.¹ According to this survey, about 74 percent of 16-24-year-olds (i.e. third-generation Muslims) preferred that Muslim women choose to wear a veil or hijab, compared to only 28 percent of Muslims aged 55 years and over (i.e. first-generation Muslims). When asked whether they should be ruled according to Shari'ah (Islamic religious law) in Britain or the existing British law, 37 percent of 16-24-year-olds said they would prefer to live under Shari'ah, as opposed to only 19 percent of Muslims over the age of 55.

There are three issues that Muslims in the West in particular will have to debate and address. The first concerns the nature of the state-religion relationship. The American Constitution tried, over two centuries ago, to settle this issue in favor of separation, but it very much alive and quite heated today. The theocratic model is out of the question but the purely secular model is also dying away. Secularism could have coexisted with 19th century liberalism, wherein life was divided into self-sufficient and self-contained compartments, but this approach is almost impossible in the present world. Now, the state has a positive role to play in policy making, education and society, so neutrality is not an option at all. Indeed, it is irrelevant and those who are harping on about it are not doing justice to human society and polity. However, there is a long range between the poles of secularism and theocracy in which many variations and articulations may be found. Muslim intellectuals, practitioners and politicians ultimately have to address this critical contemporary issue.

The second issue is related to the relationship between the nation-state and the Ummah. In this age of globalization, a lot of literature has been written on the concept of the nation-state and its demise. Therefore, when there is a discussion about Islam, Islamic culture, Islamic civilization and Muslim community, most people speak under the shadow of dying nationalism. A very important phenomenon in this regard is the rise of the masses and the grassroots revolution. In the past, the masses were not obliged and had no avenues of articulation, leverage and influence. In contemporary globalization, however, while there is one root which is the rubric of hegemony of the powerful, there is another wave of the feelings and aspirations of the people. This is a new and emerging superpower and those who are interested in the issues of human rights, justice and injustice, poverty and its eradication, duplicity, imperialism, and capitalism and its exploitation have a common agenda. In London, the agitation against American aggression in Iraq was led by the Muslim Association of Britain and participated in by all groups from the left, right and center. In this context, the concept of Ummah is a great blessing and a model for globalization.

Thirdly and lastly, in the present international scenario, inter-faith dialogue is extremely important.

¹ Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran and Zein Ja'far, January 2007, Living apart together, London: Policy Exchange (<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/libimages/246.pdf> – August 18, 2007).

The only thing we need to safeguard against is imposition. The first important Muslim-Christian dialogue took place in 1952 in Lebanon and its proceedings were published. The Islamic Colloquium in Princeton in 1954 and its follow-up in 1958 in Lahore were very important movements in this direction. It is neither a trap for hunting, nor a mere change of tactics; it is, rather, a very important platform to perform debates at the intellectual, practical, community, service level and even at the level of the political and economic agenda of the world.

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