

## **CHAPTER 10**

### **THE POLITICAL MOBILISATION OF MUSLIMS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE CASES OF GREAT BRITAIN AND FRANCE**

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## **Abstract**

This essay has a twofold objective: to describe the evolution of Muslims' political awareness in the United Kingdom and in France, and the way such awareness has materialised in political participation and action'; and to present the different types of Muslim political mobilisation. We argue that neither the Islamic State nor the Jihadist terrorism poses an existential threat to the countries of the European Union, but rather the likely sectarian political mobilization of its increasingly larger Muslim population. The essay underlines the need to understand the different reasons behind the political mobilisation of Muslim communities in the European Union's countries and what lies at its genesis. Reducing the understanding of what is Islam in Europe to vacuous references to "Islamists" and "Jihad" is reductive, factually incorrect, and dangerous. It underlies the need to debate and find realist solutions to incorporate Muslims into the political system of liberal democracies and supports the idea that the future of the EU may depend on how its member states manage to assimilate Muslim communities and integrate them into the social and political mainstream.

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Muslims, European Union, political integration

## Introduction

The spectacular nature of multiple attacks in different European Union (EU) countries and their media coverage has resulted in raising public concerns about terrorism and has contributed to create an exaggerated perception of the danger that jihadist terrorism represents to Europeans, thus diverting their attentions from issues of greater importance. This has helped develop a collective psychosis that is perhaps more insidious and dangerous than terrorism itself.

In our daily lives, both in the media and in political discourse, terrorism has become omnipresent. A limited danger has been portrayed as an existential threat to European societies. The anxiety generated by that strident narrative has infected the Academia, opinion makers and political leaders in the EU. Out of fear and/or prejudice, many of them seem too embarrassed to dare introduce this topic into their agendas.

As is widely known, Europe was recurrently flogged by terrorist acts throughout the 20th century. The present wave of terror is by no means the deadliest – far from it.<sup>1</sup> However, the need to understand the social and/or economic motivations of its perpetrators, radically different from previous terrorist movements, fully justify this study. This is particularly relevant if we consider that political Islam, which increasingly attracts important segments of the European Muslim population, and in particular its youth, is the ideological inspiration of those acts.<sup>2</sup>

This radical political mobilisation is but a manifestation, among others, of a more general issue that lies at its genesis: that of the political mobilisation of the Muslim communities of the various member-countries of the European Union. We would therefore argue that it is essential to study the issue that truly lies at its genesis, which may, contrary to terrorism, evolve and turn into an existential danger. It is not the Islamic State that poses an existential threat to the EU, but rather the sectarian religious mobilization of large tracts of the Muslim European population.

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<sup>1</sup> On the waves of terrorism and criticism of this approach see, for example, Kaplan (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Many experts and politicians see these terrorist acts as expressions of the “revolution” that the Islamic state was supposedly exporting to the entire world. We disagree with the exaggerated way those attacks are presented to the public and with the idea that of an existential threat posed by terrorism and the Islamic State to Western security. The current fear of terrorism has more to do with collective psychology - how people perceive and live with terrorist acts - than with any real threat. Regardless of what will happen to the Islamic State in the battlefield, the evolution of those socio-political movements will not be influenced by their fate. The Islamic State ideologically inspires European terrorists, but the existence of organic links has yet to be unearthed. These movements do not need the Islamic State to survive; they are autonomous, autochthonous and not necessarily their *lunga manus*.

It is crucial to understand how a growingly large sector of the European population is going to adhere to the political system of liberal democracies<sup>3</sup>. It is, in our view, an inescapable question for which it is urgent to find answers.

The enormous complexity of this phenomenon makes it difficult to understand and to influence it. In fact, we cannot speak of a homogeneous community of European Muslim citizens, but of several communities. We are confronted with multicultural communities separated by cleavages of diverse nature (ethnic, generational, cultural, linguistic, theological, class, etc.),<sup>4</sup> whose frontiers have progressively transformed and blurred.

The development of these multiple Muslim communities has been conditioned by multiple factors in each country, in particular by the provenance of its members and by the way in which the state authorities of the country they live relate to them. The absence of a unified Muslim community and, consequently, of encompassing organisations that legitimately represent them hampers their relationships with the States where they live.

This text is organised in three sections. In the first one, we elaborate on the different types of types of collective mobilisation adopted by Muslims living in the EU space. In the second one, we make a brief presentation on the evolution of their political awareness in the United Kingdom and in France, and on the way such awareness has materialised in participation and political action. The third one is dedicated to concluding remarks.

We based this essay on the works of Salima Bouyarden, Fareen Parvez and Timothy Peace, published in Jorgen S. Nielsen (2014). We shall have as temporal reference the period starting with the migrations of then colonial subjects to the European metropolises that took place after the end of World War II, with particular emphasis on the migratory waves of the sixties and seventies of the last century until the present day. We are naturally aware of the existence of established Islamic communities in Europe prior to these dates, but we take it that these are to a great extent unrelated to the issues covered in this essay.

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<sup>3</sup> On Islamic demography in Europe see, for example, *Europe's Growing Population* (Pew Report Center, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The French Muslim community includes Algerians, Moroccans, Turks and sub-Saharan Africans.

### Types of collective mobilisation

The expression of a European plural identity in the public sphere should not be seen as affirming an exclusive religious affiliation but as a civic alternative to the exploitation of the ethnic and religious aspects of its identity and a common action against any form of intellectual extremism, political or religious. This approach coexists with that in which pressure groups influence legislation and rulings to be adopted by Muslim minority communities (at least for now) who live in secular societies.

Muslims living in the EU have different views of their religion. Many do not use faith as the only lens to interpret social reality and have become politically active members of society (Frégosi, 2014: 129), using different types of collective mobilisation. Frégosi (2014: 129) identifies three, non-mutually exclusive, types: religious mobilisation, socio-political Islamic mobilisation and mobilisation based on a secular identity.

The first type of mobilisation focuses on the defence and preservation of the Muslim faith and / or its rituals, in order to remind believers that faith is the most important dimension of life. These actions are intended for Muslims to be more devout and to frequent mosques more regularly. This type of mobilisation takes three complementary forms: ceremonial mobilisation, associative mobilisation, and sectarian / spiritual mobilisation. In the second type, that is the case of the socio-political Islamic mobilisation, the groups develop their socio-political activity based on the theological foundations of Islam. For them, being a Muslim means being simultaneously socially and politically committed. In a Muslim context, this means the social aim of Islam is to progressively establish Islamic states, and to implement Islamic law. In a non-Muslim context, its aim is to promote a more just social order that is in accordance with Islamic ethics (Frégosi, 2014: 132).

These dynamics can also lead to three types of mobilisation: civic mobilisation, nation-centred mobilisation of origin and radical mobilisation. For followers of the first type, being a Muslim means being socially and politically engaged. On this, Tariq Ramadan (2003: 128)<sup>5</sup> states that there is no Islamic consciousness without political consciousness, a view that encourages Muslims to compound their religious commitment with political activism.

Mobilisation centred on the nation of origin is used mainly by political movements that look at the Islam as structured according to national parameters.

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<sup>5</sup> Frégosi quoting Ramadan (2014: 134).

Defending Islam means defending the connection with the country of origin, and applies especially to expatriates (Frégosi, 2014: 134). A good example of this case is that of the *Millî Gorus*, an ethnic-religious movement close to the “Muslim Brotherhood” whose history is closely linked to Turkish immigration. The last type of mobilisation is characteristic of Islamic radical movements in Europe and the jihadist movement. It is usually embraced by young Muslims born in Europe and is not confined to mosques. These groups nurture communities in which actively promote scepticism about Islam’s peaceful nature and motivations. Finally, we have the mobilisation on a straight secular basis, i.e. of Muslims who claim their identity in a secular way. These currents refer to Islam not to claim a specific religious identity but rather a cultural identity.

### **Awareness, participation, and political action**

The emergence of identity policies defining Muslims as “Muslims” is a recent phenomenon and refers mainly to the early 1990s. In the UK, religious identity was subordinated to an “Asian” or “Black” identity, whereas in France, the “Arab” identity of emigrants surpassed any other criterion of identity. Organised forms of political participation began sooner within the British Muslim community than that of the French, albeit with a small public impact. Voting was then linked to citizenship. In France, immigrants were not entitled to vote because they were not French citizens, a right they could only acquire after five years of residence in the country, and to be elected only after 10 years, in contrast to the situation of immigrants in the UK who already had voting rights as citizens of the Commonwealth, which facilitated their initial participation in the political system (Bouyarden, 2014: 106).

The key reason for the near-non-involvement of the first generation of Muslims in politics in France is that they tended to regard naturalisation as a religious infidelity. Acquiring French nationality was considered a sinful act (Bouyarden, 2014: 105). Despite this obstacle, Muslim emigrants who arrived in the UK and France after World War II did become involved in struggles for political equality, from workplace actions to struggles against restrictions on immigration. In the UK as well as in France, Muslims participated in trade unions in which Muslim identity had no meaning. Later, quite a few second-generation Muslims actively participated in the alter-globalisation movement,<sup>6</sup> the global social movement against neoliberalism.

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<sup>6</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of the participation of Muslims in the alter-globalisation movement, see Peace (2015).

Such participation did not come out of nowhere; it was the continuation of previous struggles. Asian youth movements and the *Mouvement Beur* were the most symbolic of these social movements. In both countries, these early activists mobilised in the fight against racism and police brutality. There are even today groups that in some extent claim legacy from these movements.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the eighties, the identity foundations of these communities were altered by the occurrence of two important events. The year 1989 was a time of qualitative change, respectively brought about by the Salman Rushdie case in the UK,<sup>8</sup> and by the ban on wearing the veil in French schools. These two events contributed significantly to the development of a “Muslim” identity that has gradually overtaken other identity criteria.<sup>9</sup> The wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Chechnya, all of which took place in the 1990s, coupled with the two Gulf wars in 1991 and 2003, have stimulated and reinforced the call for Muslim causes as a mobiliser of large groups of young people Muslims.

While in the UK, the Rushdie affair and the first Gulf War visibly sparked large-scale protest rallies of the Muslim community,<sup>10</sup> in France only a small minority copied them. Throughout the 1990s, political mobilisation of Muslims in Britain and France continued to take different shapes. Whereas British Muslims’ demands were fundamentally proactive, those of the French Muslims arose in response to the repressive actions of the French authorities. The few occasions in which they mobilised massively were in protest against the exclusion from public schools of girls who refused to take off their veil in class. The more defensive posture of the French Muslims offers us a first indication that it is the assertiveness of the French State to apply a universalist and assimilationist approach in opposition to the British cultural pluralism, that defines the context of its claims and demands. The protests of the French Muslims generally took the form of public demonstrations that weren’t marked by acts of confrontation or violence.

British Muslims have been indeed more affirmative in presenting their claims and gaining official recognition from the government.

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<sup>7</sup> These include the Newham Monitoring Project (NMP) and the *Mouvement de l’Immigration et de la Banlieue*, which took part in the European Social Forum (ESF).

<sup>8</sup> We refer here to the controversy caused by Salman Rushdie’s publication of the book *Satanic Verses* in 1988, which caused heated debate and violent reactions from various Muslim groups who accused the writer of blasphemy; he went into hiding after Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa ordering Muslims to kill him, in 1989.

<sup>9</sup> Although not in full; ethnic criteria still prevail in France, but in an attenuated form.

<sup>10</sup> On the demonstrations of the British Muslim community against the war, see Peace (2015a).

Their proactivity resulted in the formation of the *Muslim Council of Great Britain* (CMG) in 1997, an institution that gathers more than 500 mosques, schools, and Islamic associations, and that, in a way, mediates the relationship of the Muslim communities with the British authorities. More recently, the CMG sought to take over as the voice of British Muslims, and the sole arbiter in the dialogue between the British government and all Muslim groups.

Here too, we can find significant differences between Muslims in France and the UK. While the CMG was essentially a bottom-up institution, its French counterpart CFCM (*Le Conseil Fédéral du Culte Musulman*), founded in 2003, was a top-down creation of the French government as an attempt to incorporate Muslims in the French political landscape (Parvez, 2014: 194), and to function as the official interlocutor of the French State in the regulation of their religious activities.

Muslim groupings that appeared in the UK during the 1990s, such as the *Muslim Parliament*, the *Islamic Society of Great Britain* and later the *Muslim Association of Britain*, were founded by first-generation immigrants, almost exclusively dedicated to religious questions. In France, Muslim public participation took off in a different way. French second-generation Muslim activists formed their own organisations, which later regrouped under the umbrella of the *Collectif des Musulmans de France* (CMF). These groups tended to mobilise not only around religious issues, but also tackled several other important concerns (curbing police brutality, demanding social and welfare equality, and facilitating asylum requests). Secular groups such as the *Mouvement de l'immigration et des Banlieues* began working with the more religious CMF. The appearance the movement *DiverCité*, that actively brought together secular and religious activist groups has had no equivalent in the UK.

Important to note that in the UK, the Muslim vote traditionally tended to support the Labour Party, whereas in France Muslims would mainly rally with the Socialist Party (Bouyarden, 2014: 116), when it was relevant in the French society. In 2006, Muslims in the European parliaments were mostly in the left side of the political spectrum. There was no conscience of a specific Muslim vote (Sinno, 2009: 72-5).<sup>11</sup>

On pair with these developments, Muslims opted to contest local elections before engaging in national elections. We have witnessed the birth of a Muslim lobby in Britain to mobilize the community vote, to support candidates in local elections around Islamic issues, to negotiate and establish cooperative relations with the state authorities. This Muslim lobby seeks to influence and cooperate with the British government, namely through organisations such as the *Muslim Council of Great Britain* and the *Forum against Islamophobia* (FAIR).

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<sup>11</sup> Nielsen (2014: 2) quoting Sinno.



In France, analysts are divided over whether there is actually a Muslim lobby. Some are very sceptical about its existence, considering it a myth.<sup>12</sup> The political participation of Muslims there should not be seen only through the framework of cultural identity, but also of class relations, which increases the complexity of the analysis. The economic aspect and the social scale are aspects that must also be included in the study of the communities of Muslims in the various European countries.

Apart from being divided by ethnic motives, French Muslims are also divided according to class positions and relations, which became central to the dynamics of Islam and politics in France (Parvez, 2014: 190). The Muslim political field is divided by social class and peripheral-urban duality, with the working classes in the *banlieues* (suburbs, typically lower class), and participation is affected by the strength or weakness of their ties with the Muslim middle class (Parvez, 2014: 191). The result was the breakdown of ties between middle-class Muslim activists and those of the *quartiers*, where strict veil use and gender segregation are practiced (Parvez, 2014: 191), and the leaders of the Islamic community. This medium is naturally more conducive to the penetration of Salafists, who did not only withdraw from state-organised politics but also from political participation as members of civil society (Parvez, 2014: 191).

Compared with other European countries, Britain's ethnic minorities have been politically very successful. In Britain, every party in the political spectrum makes a huge effort to get closer to the Muslim electorate. The relationship between the Labour Party and the Muslim communities has always been very strong, and most Muslims who are members of political parties are associated with the Labour Party. Until very recently, most Muslim politicians, whether at local or national level, fit this profile. However, this situation has changed, especially in the large Muslim constituencies, due to the creation of the *Respect Party*,<sup>13</sup> a political grouping that has drastically reduced the support of Muslims to the Labour Party in certain areas, both in local government and in the lower house, in Westminster.

Their success was an impressive achievement considering that smaller parties in Britain have always been at a disadvantage, given the first-past-the-post nature of the UK's electoral system. The use of networking links to mosques, religious organisations and community groups were crucial to ensure support for their candidates.

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<sup>12</sup> For a confrontation of contrasting views on the topic, see Bouyarden (2014: 117, 119).

<sup>13</sup> On the foundation and development of the Respect Party, see Peace (2013).

In fact, this seems the only case in Europe where a party dominated by Muslim leaders and activists has achieved an electoral prowess despite strong competition from mainstream parties. The *Respect Party* is a case study of how a social movement has managed to evolve and crystallise into an enduring relationship between political parties and civil society.

There isn't, to our knowledge, anything similar in any other European country. The *Respect Party* has inspired Muslims in other countries, but the initiatives have resulted in stark failures. We currently find "Muslim parties" in other countries as well as individual candidates running on other platforms as representatives of Muslims, but none of these initiatives have had the same success as the *Respect Party*.

Muslims in these two countries were no strangers to attempts at civic participation and supranational social cohesion. Despite what has already been said about the heterogeneity of European Muslims, there is a desire among many of them to create a European Muslim civic organisation that promotes civic participation of Muslims at European level, as an alternative to the politically unproductive tactics of the "Muslim vote" or of the "Muslim lobby" implemented in some countries, notably in the UK and France. However, we cannot fail to note that the attempts to unite European Muslims in a single transnational civic platform were always failed projects, given the deep divergences that separate them (Bouyarden, 2014: 119).<sup>14</sup>

### **Concluding remarks**

Despite the exaggerated public exposure of terrorism provided by the mainstream media in their unbridled struggle for share, it seems clear from the foregoing that to reduce the understanding of what is Islam in Europe to vacuous references to "Islamists" and "Jihad" is reductive, factually incorrect and dangerous, as is suggested by the proliferation of studies on contemporary terrorism and terrorists.

It seems crucial for democracies to understand the reasons for the radicalisation of large segments of the younger Muslim population, in European countries. Despite the diversity of answers being provided by scholars (Basra, et al., 2016, Renard, 2016, Coolsaet, 2011, Coolsaet, 2016, Khosrokhavar, 2017), all tend to agree that the reason for such radicalisation has deep sociological roots, as was suggested above.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On this subject, see Nielsen (2014: 215-238)

<sup>15</sup> On this argumentative logic see, for example, Richards (2003).

One important reason that makes many young Muslims receptive to the calls for radicalisation is the worsening of social conditions associated with the economic decline of Europe], which affects different segments of the population in different ways. The general cooling of the European economy has disproportionately affected the Muslim population and created a frighteningly high unemployment rate among youngsters.

In addition to constant discrimination in the labour market, they feel socially alienated, deprived of rights and very resentful, a risky brew that helps create an atmosphere conducive to the acceptance of radical discourses and easily led to recruitment to radical militancy. On the other hand, these developments have fostered mounting Islamophobic discourses that have been duly exploited by populist and far right activists taking advantage of these manifestations].<sup>16</sup> A long-recognised crisis of representation in the EU has, by itself, worsened this situation. An increasing number of citizens feel no longer represented by the main political parties, trade unions and other traditional institutions. Hence, the prospects of an adherence of the Muslim communities to the principles and values of liberal democracies have clearly weakened, and the idea that they could integrate party systems (themselves undergoing dramatic transition and suffering from popular discredit, with the political centre losing ground on a daily basis) has become less and less appealing.

Although a large proportion of European Muslims come from families living in Europe for three or four generations, many are not actually integrated into the societies in which they live. They reside in predominantly Muslim areas, in more or less autonomous and watertight, kinship-based communities, where they have created and developed their forms of identity, their system of belonging, their loyalties to friendship networks, which, as in the early years of the immigration process, still function as a mechanism of collective support – both independent and parallel to those offered by public institutions.<sup>17</sup>

It would be wise if European leaders seriously worry with this panoply of issues. The challenges to liberal democracies are not only posed by the proliferation of radical Salafist groups but also by other Muslim groups that have sectarian political projects and are seeking electoral access to power.

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<sup>16</sup> In a research dating back to 2008, Matthies associates the growing debate on Islam in European societies with the rise of the far right.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Levitt, director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, notes that only eight of the 114 imams in Brussels spoke one of the official Belgian languages Belgium (Levitt, 2016).

If these developments aren't properly studied, this social movement has the potential to increase inordinately, risking of becoming uncontrollable. At present, the political organisation of the Muslim communities in the two countries covered, with the notable exception of the above-mentioned case of the *Respect Party*, is in an embryonic condition], fending off its own contradictions. Political leaderships have not yet decisively asserted themselves, strategies are not fine-tuned, and there are no sufficiently mobilising political programs. However, it is easily conceivable that one day these communities also bring about mass political movements equally alien to liberal democracies' values.<sup>18</sup> This situation would worsen if defenders of sectarian violence prevailed, to the detriment of those fostering more moderate approaches. A sectarian and subversive political environment would lead Europe to further securitisation or, if we prefer, to the "Israelisation" of the continent. Strengthening security structures would inevitably lead to the marginalising and ostracising of more moderate political forces. In conclusion, the future of the EU will depend on how the Member States know and are able to assimilate Muslim communities and insert them into the social and political mainstream.

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<sup>18</sup> Would we indulge in a Houellebecquian dystopian view, we could imagine a future state of affairs where advocates of sectarian violence prevailed over more moderate approaches, and where a sectarian and subversive political environment would direct Europe towards securitisation, or even the "Israelisation" of the continent. Strengthening security structures would consequently lead to the marginalisation and ostracising of moderate political forces.

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