Strategics Sectors | **Culture & Society**

Training of Imams and the Fight against Radicalization

Frank Peter
Assistant professor
Hamad Bin Khalifa University,
College of Islamic Studies, Doha

Public concern about the training of imams has been a shared feature of debates in many European countries for more than a decade now. While attempts to promote the establishment of European training facilities for imams date back to the 1980s in some countries, the theme did not become a common denominator of European debates until the 2000s. By the middle of that decade, the potential role of imams in processes of radicalization was a recurrent item in debates about Islam. This article will, first, briefly retrace how the training of imams was dealt with before concerns about radicalization emerged in the early 2000s. The concept of radicalization will, secondly, be examined more closely. What exactly does the term designate in policy discourse and do the omnipresent references to it allow us to conclude that it constitutes a common focus in policy-making? In a third step, I will examine the outcome of efforts undertaken in the past decade and identify structural obstacles to training.

Diversity

Before radicalization became a shared European concern and generated specific policy strategies – notably in the aftermath of the assassination of Theo van Gogh and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London – the training of imams had already been on the public agenda, especially in relation to 'integration' policies, although only in a very small number of countries.

In the Netherlands, training for imams was first placed on the political agenda by the Waardenburg Commission (Werkgroep Waardenburg) in 1982. It was the first time that the new 'ethnic minorities' which had attracted the attention of the Dutch government since the late 1970s were considered from a religious perspective. One of the Commission's recommendations was, in fact, to establish training options for imams in the Netherlands with state subsidies. The rationale given for this measure in the report prefigures much of the thinking which was to shape later debates in other European countries. Referring to the different context of the largely secularized (and traditionally Christian) Western societies in which Dutch Muslims were living, the report argued, the basic tasks of the imam had been redefined. Whereas the essential qualification of imams in Morocco or Turkey was knowledge of the Islamic tradition, the Dutch context required imams to answer questions facing Muslims there.[1] Thus, a profound knowledge of Dutch society, language and norms were now essential skills for the imam. In light of this requirement, the training of imams in the Netherlands, along with a series of other measures, found approval.[2]

In France, similar arguments have been made since the late 1980s, and indeed continue to be made to this day.[3] From the late 1980s, the threat of 'fundamentalist Islam' led the government to strengthen cooperation with governments in North Africa and Turkey and to establish tight control of visa applications by imams, triggering the first debates about

[1] Marcel Maussen. *Ruimte voor de Islam? Stedelijk beleid, voorzieningen, organisaties*, Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 2006, p. 240, fn. 8.
[2] Welmoet Boender. *Imam in Nederland. Opvattingen over zijn religieuze rol in de samenleving,* Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 2007.
[3] Frank Peter. "Leading the Community of the Middle Way: A Study of The Muslim Field in France," *Muslim World*, 96,4 (2006), p. 707-736.

training imams in France.[4] As in the Dutch case (and later in all countries), imams were identified as leaders of the 'Muslim community' and seen as crucial actors in integration or segregation processes. (As we will see below, achieving the declared aims proved extremely difficult.) In other countries, governments focused attention on another group of actors, namely teachers of religious education in state schools. In Belgium, for example, Islam had already been recognized as a religion in 1974 and Islamic religious education was introduced in state schools the following year. From the late 1980s onwards, anxieties about foreign influence on Islamic religious education increased considerably.[5] Against the background of an emerging policy of 'integration,' measures were taken during the 1990s to create training facilities in Belgium so as to reduce the dependency on foreign-trained teachers.[6] In Austria, Islamic religious education had also been introduced at a comparatively early stage in 1982. Curricula content and teacher training were subject to close public scrutiny in the 2000s. In both countries, debates about training imams were of minor importance for a long time.

'Radicalization'

The concern over radicalization and 'home-grown terrorists' which emerged in the early 2000s may appear, at first sight, to have been a unifying factor in this diverse landscape of western Europe. Indeed, in 2005, the EU adopted a strategy for 'combating radicalization.'[7] Moreover, given the recurrent references to specific mosques, imams and preachers in accounts of radicalization, one might expect the dramatically heightened concern with radicalization processes – and, with their prevention or with deradicalization – to generate more interest in the role of imams and their training. In fact, policies on imams were affected in much more complex ways by the turn towards various forms of 'combating radicalization.' While this is not the place to survey developments in different European countries,[8] two general remarks about the concept of radicalization are in order here.

The term 'radicalization' is regularly used in public debates, as if it functions as a general concept while in fact it is being used differently depending on the specific policy context.

First, it is important to reflect carefully upon the conceptualization of radicalism itself. The definition of the cluster of terms 'radical,' as has been pointed out, is very much contested and relates to a number of other equally contested terms, notably 'extremist.' For this purpose, it is worth mentioning that it is not certain that the notion of radicalization indicates a policy field with relatively unified objects and aims. In his critical review of the concept in 2010, Mark Sedgwick argued that the term 'radicalization' was a "source of confusion."[9] This is partly because the term is sometimes treated as self-evident, as if the distinction between 'radical' and 'moderate' does not need to be made explicit (which, more often than not, is incorrect). It also has to do with the fact that the term 'radicalization' is regularly used in public debates, as if it functions as a general concept – i.e. as if it can be applied identically in all policy fields – while in fact it is being used differently depending on the specific policy context. Thus, references to radical(ism) in the field of security, or in the field of integration, or for-

[4] Solenne Jouanneau. *Les Imams en France. Une autorité religieuse sous contrôle*, Marseille, Agone, 2013; Solenne Jouanneau. "Régulariser ou non un imam étranger en France: droit au séjour et définition du 'bon imam'," *Politix*, 86, 2 (2009), p. 147-166.
[5] Meryem Kanmaz. "The Recognition and Institutionalization of Islam in Belgium,"*Muslim World*, 92 (2002), p. 99-113.
[6] Meryem Kanmaz. Mohammed El Battiui and Firouzeh Nahavandi. *Mosquées, imams et professeurs de religion islamique en Belgique. État de la question et enjeux*, Bruxelles, Fondation Roi Baudouin, 2004, p. 27, 32; cf. Leni Franken, "Islamic Education in Belgium: Past, Present, and Future, " *Religious Education*, 112 (2017), p. 491-503.
[7] Bakker, Edwin. "EU Counter-radicalization Policies: A Comprehensive and Consistent Approach?," *Intelligence and National Security*, 30, 2-3 (2015), p. 281-305.
[8] See EL Difraoui, Asiem and Uhlmann, Milena. "Prévention de la radicalization et déradicalization: les modèles allemand, britannique et danois," *Politique étrangère*, 4 (2015), p. 171-182.
[9] Sedgwick, Mark. "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22,4 (2010), p. 479-494.

eign policy, do not necessarily coincide in their meaning in any given country. Put differently, the aims pursued in these different institutional fields – whether by government institutions or other actors – are not necessarily identical nor do they cohere with each other.[10] Obviously, the salience of Sedgwick's observation will vary from one place to another. Here, it serves as an important general reminder that common references to the fight against 'radicalization' can imply different frames and may produce quite diverse actions.

While ideology is, today, arguably considered by many to be the main factor in radicalism, there is an increasing awareness that ideology does not translate easily into clearly defined, homogeneous organizations or spaces. The focus of more recent efforts to combat 'radicalization' or promote 'disengagement' is consequently much wider and goes far beyond mosque and community structures and actors

A second remark more directly concerns the place of imams in state policies. There is a strong tendency in debates – and studies – about radicalization to conceive of such processes as being highly individualized. Implicit in this view is a relative downgrading not only of 'politics' (e.g., government policies as a potential causative factor for radicalization), but also of religious community structures including the function of the imam. This is not to say that community in its various forms is simply disregarded in strategies for combating 'radicalization.' Concern about Salafi groups is now, for example, widespread and other examples could be cited. However, in the light of the complex interplay of a multitude of factors flagged up by analyses of radicalization processes, it is difficult to simply consider mosque spaces or imams as key factors at play. In other words, while ideology is, today, arguably considered by many to be the main factor in radicalism, there is an increasing awareness that ideology does not translate easily into clearly defined, homogeneous organizations or spaces.[11] The focus of more recent efforts to combat 'radicalization' or promote 'disengagement' is consequently much wider and goes far beyond mosque and community structures and actors.[12]

Differentiating Results

The concern with radicalization has generated complex effects on how governments approach the issue of imams and their training. While more attention is certainly given to imams, new policy measures have not necessarily followed. Indeed, when considering the current situation and the developments of the past decade in the western European context, one observes, primarily, a lack of substantial achievements in the creation of imam training facilities.

The obstacles standing in the way of national training for imams are more clearly recognizable today. These factors may be divided here into two groups. Some relate to the legal and political conditions for setting up training programmes. Does the State have a legal basis, for example, to contribute or intervene in programmes and funding? Which criteria does the government apply when identifying 'acceptable' Muslim partners in such ventures? Etc. Then there are factors determining the viability

[10] "The thought involved in non-violent radicalism may well be a threat to integration, but it is especially action that supports violence that is a security threat. The thought involved in non-violent radicalism, however, is also relevant to terrorists' supportive milieu and to terrorists' wider constituency, and so does require attention. It is not self-evident, however, that the agenda of the integration authorities determines the appropriate variety of attention." (Sedgwick, 489)

[11] See notably the discussion of this issue by Lene Kühle, who introduces the concept "cultic milieu" in order to analytically grasp the environment of radicalization processes. See Lene Kühle and Lasse Lindekilde. *Radicalization among Young Muslims in Aarhus*, Aarhus: The Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation & Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, 2010.

[12] See, e.g., France's *Plan d'action contre la radicalisaiton et le terorrisme. Dossier de presse*, 2016.

of training programmes on the academic market. These have to do with more durable structural features and it is partly for this reason that they deserve particular attention. On proper scrutiny, one finds that some of them pose major obstacles to the creation of national training programmes, quite independently of the visions and aims of the government. The case of the Netherlands, where three programmes for Muslim chaplains and Islamic theology were set up in universities with government support in 2005/6, is instructive. In 2013, two of them announced their closure. The lower than expected intake (in all three places) and a high drop-out rate sealed the fate of these programmes.[13] The basic problems they faced can be observed today in many contexts. At the most general level, mention needs to be made of the relatively low degree of professionalization of the imam function, which limits the scope and impact of these training programmes from the outset. Another basic problem is the lower salary paid to imams in European mosque communities (the case of chaplains differs notably), which is starkly at odds with the considerable investments which have to be made by prospective imams; this further reduces the scope for potential applicants. Furthermore, Islamic study programmes in European universities – existing or planned – are, more often than not, recognized only as second best in comparison to programmes in the Islamic world. The fact that moves to create imam training programmes are often a more or less direct response to anxieties about the 'integration' of Muslims may also weaken the appeal of these initiatives; it diminishes their competitive position in relation to independent Islamic institutes for higher education in European countries.

The concern with radicalization has generated complex effects on how governments approach the issue of imams and their training. While more attention is certainly given to imams, new policy measures have not necessarily followed

While this non-exhaustive list of factors does not extend to the problems faced by individual projects or their outright failure, it gives an idea of the true level of ambition behind declared aims to establish training programmes and indicates some of the changes which would be necessary to see substantial progress materialize.

[13] Welmoet Boender. "Embedding Islam in the 'Moral Covenants' of European States: The Case of a State-Funded Imam Training in the Netherlands," *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 2 (2013), p. 227-247.