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Islamophobic Trends in Europe

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Hostility towards the Muslim presence in Europe is a growing concern, not only for populations professing Islam but also for numerous actors – both public and private – concerned about respect for human rights. Even if Europe has an "anti-Muslim" archive, started in the Middle Ages with the advent and rise of Islam, the contemporary period, panic-stricken, among other things, by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and then the 2001 attacks in New York, the 2004 bombings in Madrid and the 2005 bombings in London, has ushered in new expressions of Islamophobia.[1]

The different societies comprising the European Union, in particular those along the Mediterranean Sea, have built a singular rapport with the worlds of Islam on the one hand and Muslim populations on the other. Despite the thousands of native Europeans who have converted to Islam, Muslim presence is closely tied to immigration of peoples from Africa, Asia or Turkey, as well as the multi-secular European Islam of the Balkans. Considering Islamophobia in Europe entails keeping in mind these national differences based on history and the dynamics of settlement. For instance, in relations between states, majority groups and Muslim minorities are not systematically influenced by a common colonial history, as in France or Great Britain. Moreover, the sociological composition of Muslim minorities varies from one country or region to another, just as they tend to diversify within each area. The legal and political situation of Muslims living in Europe is likewise highly variable from one country to another, although European Union institutions are contributing to the process of homogenising minorities' rights and duties. Hence, many Muslims in Malta, for instance, are asylum-seeking immigrants within a highly particular system of social and administrative constraints.

Despite the plurality of regional and national situations and despite the diversity of Muslim populations and their socio-political status, rejection of Islam has spread rapidly since the mid-1990s in the European political sphere, contributing to the significant trend of reorganisation of the ideological and electoral landscape. The majority of nationalist and populist movements of the right and extreme right include a strong anti-Islam component in their discourse, in parallel with the rise of new forms of mobilisation on a supranational level based on the theory of the 'Islamisation' of Europe. This theory holds that the Muslims, whose number is supposedly increasing exponentially, have designs and intend to gradually wipe out national cultures. A theory furiously brandished by the most extreme nationalist movements, but likewise shared by established political parties claiming a certain social progressivism. A unifying theory that is contributing to the regeneration of xenophobic movements that were winding down in the 1990s.

Some of these Islamophobic political movements or organisations rely on a popular base whose growth has been significant over the past few years and which is tending to stabilise in various European countries. The Swiss Popular Party, which was behind an initiative for a popular referendum on the construction of minarets in 2009, has become the

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[1] Abdellali HAJJAT, Marwan MOHAMMED, *Islamophobie. Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le problème musulman*, Paris, La Découverte, 2013.

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main political party in the Federal Assembly, holding more than a quarter of the seats, the Freedom Party of Austria has become the third political force in the country, like the National Front (FN) in France, led by Marine Le Pen. Political parties "pioneering" in the struggle against "Islamisation" are Pia Kjærsgaard's Danish People's Party and Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV, The Netherlands), and they have managed to prevail on the political front by developing a drastically Islamophobic discourse. Marine Le Pen's FN, which is in a position of outsider in the political arena, has followed the "Nordic way" through its "de-demonisation" strategy. "To understand Marine's FN," explains the sociologist and political analyst Laurent Chambon, "one must realise that Pia Kjærsgaard built the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) on the ruins of an agonising xenophobe, nationalist party that had suffered many internal divisions. After having given the party a new name and a new structure, Kjærsgaard spent ten years manufacturing a well-oiled, obedient electoral machine. She then succeeded in making it an indispensable coalition partner to the conservative, liberal Danish right for ten years. To do so, she developed various themes that necessarily [recall] Marine [Le Pen]'s FN: no official contact with the racist, homophobic and anti-Semitic extreme right; a party that obeys its leader without dissidence; a discourse focussing on Islam as an ideology threatening to European civilisation; the use *ad nauseam* of classic nativist nationalist themes; the defence of the welfare State and social gains against freeloaders from abroad; the real people against the system hijacked by the multi-culturalist left; Zionism in rein-

forced concrete."[2] This "Nordic way" is not followed to the letter by the different nationalist movements, but Islamophobia, its ideological and cultural anchor, looks to be there to stay in the other Scandinavian countries. In 2010, for the first time, members of the Democrats of Sweden party were elected to the Riksdag with approximately 6% of the votes. In 2011, the True Fins became Finland's third party in votes received, and the Norwegian Progress Party took 22.9% of the votes in 2009, making it Norway's second political force.

The Islamisation theory being developed and fostered by these nationalist movements takes different regional forms that adapt it to the cultural and political context. In any case, a common thematic framework can be identified:

- The demographic threat. This postulate, which has been progressively developed since the 1950s, primarily targets non-white populations of countries of the South at a time when industrial growth accompanying the reconstruction of Europe has contributed to widening the gap in standards of living. It is an anxiety that has been growing for half a century due to the ageing of the autochthonous European population.
- The intentional invasion. The growing visibility and institutionalisation of the Muslim presence in Europe are thus described as signs of an intentional strategy of invasion and replacement. The construction of Muslim places of worship or Muslim cultural centres and the development of the Halal market are certainly not analysed as the expression of roots and sustainable integration in the name of freedom of religion and beliefs. Islam, in each of its manifestations, is construed as a public problem.
- The defence of European progress and civilisation. The rise of Islamophobic discourse has allowed European nationalist movements an ideological and rhetorical renewal. Xenophobic, homophobic and anti-Semitic ideas are progressively being supplanted – at least ostensibly – by a progressive rhetoric, as long as it is valid against Muslims. The "new European populism"[3] thus claims to be a guardian of women's rights,

[2] Laurent CHAMBON, "Le FN ressuscite la droite," *Minorités*, No. 129, 13 May 2012, www.minorites.org/index.php/2-la-revue/1318-le-fn-ressuscite-la-droite.html.
[3] Raphaël LIOGIER. *Le mythe de l'islamisation*, Paris, Seuil, 2011.

secularism and homosexual rights, values that are supposedly threatened by an Islam presented as the antithesis of Western progress.

The development of the notion of Islam's incompatibility underlying these postulates is not unique to nationalist parties and even tends to transcend right-left divisions. Indeed, it is even a specific characteristic of European Islamophobia, illustrated by the regular participation of intellectuals, democratic movements or wholly legitimate democratic governments – opposed, moreover, to racism on the basis of origin or skin colour – in the passionate, irrational construction of a "Muslim problem." A problem that has suddenly become the object of political consensus, particularly in France, a fact that populist movements are capitalising on.

One could argue that, if Islam poses a problem, it is because of the multiplication of violent acts legitimised by the Muslim religious discourse (1995-1996 attacks in Paris, those in New York and Washington in 2001, Madrid in 2004, London in 2005, etc.) and the changes in the practice of Islam in Europe (multiplication of places of worship, emergence of Salafism, etc.). Although one cannot deny these tangible events, associated, on the one hand, with the evolution of political violence in the world and, on the other, to changes in Muslim religious practices in Europe, one could cite many examples of violent acts or non-Muslim religious practices which are precisely not construed as a public problem (or at least not as much), such as actions by traditionalist Catholics against elective abortion or same-sex marriages, the rise of the African Pentecostal movement in working-class neighbourhoods in France, the over-representation of "separatist" movements among "terrorist" acts registered by Europol, etc.

The construction of a "European Muslim problem" entails a demand for solutions and produces specific effects on the lives of Muslims (whether real or alleged). Responses vary according to the manner in which the "Muslim problem" is construed in different public spaces, its focal points and national political cultures. In France or Belgium, for instance, the matter of the Islamic headscarf occupies a central position, at the intersection of issues relating to secularism, gender equality and "communitarianism." "Communitarianism" and "Islamic headscarf" issues that create far less tension in British public opinion,

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greatly attached to freedom of conscience and the role of intermediate communities. In other countries, as Italy, for instance, the Muslim problem is expressed more directly, with more xenophobic overtones, etc. The response in France to the headscarf matter was legal, with various laws banning its presence in certain places (public schools for the headscarf, all public spaces for the niqab). More globally, there is no "standard" solution and the different areas of Europe are marked by highly varied forms of rejection and discrimination against Muslim populations of diverse immigrant origins. Numerous national and international surveys allow us to draw the contours of the European experience for Muslim minorities; namely, the existence of a social penalty associated with real or presumed affiliation with Islam. Measuring the rejection of Islam and of Muslims is not an easy task, insofar as statistical measures or systems are heterogeneous from one country to another. In some countries, Islamophobia is not measured at all. Moreover, each of these instruments has its limits. To sum it up, there are four quantification methods:

- Administrative records based on the action taken by victims, such as court claims or data from institutions dedicated to the protection of minorities;
- Opinion surveys designed to map the political status of Islam and Muslims;
- Situation testing, allowing the statistical establishment of the existence of discrimination in specific social spaces;
- Victimisation surveys, which are general population surveys designed to measure crime and the sense of insecurity by directly addressing individuals and thus helping to overcome the many shortcomings of official records.

On the European level, two types of comparative survey on Islamophobia are viable. International surveys on values and opinions provide a picture of the social and political status of Muslim minorities. These show a solid rejection of Muslims that varies according to the region and country. Thus, according to a Eurobarometer survey in 2010, 66% of those surveyed in France were averse to Muslims, 60% of those surveyed in Belgium were averse, 58% in Sweden, 54% in Denmark, 51% in the Netherlands and finally, half of those surveyed in the United Kingdom; a trend that has been on the rise since 2009, particularly in France and Belgium. A survey carried out by the Pew Research Center in 2008 (Pew Global Attitudes Survey) likewise reveals that hostile attitudes towards Muslims are on the rise, taking different forms in different European countries.[4]

Besides these opinion polls, a victimisation survey carried out on the European level provides additional information on the ordeals of discrimination. The latter is not easily measured, since it depends on other social and physical markers. In this regard, the preliminary results of the EU-MIDIS (European Union Minorities and Discrimination) Survey are precious. This programme marks a break with the monitoring practices of EU institutions. Since 2001, many reports have pointed out the deficiencies in quantitative evaluation of racism and discrimination in Europe and have proposed the development of specific surveys or the addition of questionnaire modules to existent surveys focussing on racism and discrimination issues. The 2008 EU-MIDIS survey was carried out on 23,500 individuals in the EU's 27 countries. It allows us to study the discrimination experienced by "minorities" by focussing on two groups in particular in each of the Member States. Discrimination is examined in a multitude of situations: the workplace, accommodations market, contact with healthcare personnel, social services and schools, food venues (restaurants, cafés and bars), textile and clothing shops and access to banking services (opening an account or securing a loan). The experience of Muslims is the object of a publication whose salient points are: one Muslim out of three in Europe declares having experienced an average of eight incidents of discriminatory nature over the past twelve months (34% of men and 26% of women). Moreover, newcomers and non-citizens are declaring greater rejection on the basis of their origin. On the other hand, the report points out that traditional or religious garb (such as the hijab) has no significant impact on experiences of discrimination, although one cannot precisely distinguish the incidence per country for the time being.

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The place and treatment of minorities in the political construction of Europe is a major issue at a time when the weight of nationalist movements sharing Islamophobic postulates is advancing, even in the European Parliament. The lukewarm attitude displayed by the majority of EU Member States in recognising Islamophobia is not a very encouraging message being sent to Muslims, the majority of whom are also EU citizens. A situation that is even more complicated by the geopolitical context marked by the revolutions in the Arab world and the rise of political movements referring to Islam while using violence against civilians.

[4] For a detailed analysis of the Pew Research Center's data, see: www.ru.nl/publish/pages/.../scs201_msc_thesis_michael_savelkoul.pdf.