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Educating Imams in Europe

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One little noticed result of the events of September 11, 2001, is that it drew the attention of European states to the *problematique* of an ongoing influx of foreign imams (Muslim religious leaders) into their countries. Indeed, the large majority of imams currently serving in European mosques are recruited in Muslim countries. Trained in traditional *madradas*, *Imam Hatip* schools in Turkey or other religious institutions somewhere in the Middle East, they are generally unfamiliar with Western, multicultural societies. In an attempt to take matters into their own hands, European governments have sought to establish imam education programs at local universities. The initiative is significant in both the security and societal realms: it is an attempt to prevent the domination of radical imams and ensure that imams play a positive role in the integration of Muslims into Western society.

For decades, Middle Eastern states with large expatriate communities residing in Europe have instructed imams to serve their citizens abroad. The most obvious manifestation of this policy has surely been the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, the Turkish state authority in charge of religious affairs. The *Diyanet* systematically selects imams and religious teachers and sends approved persons to Europe in order to serve expatriate Turkish communities. Likewise, Morocco regularly sends delegations of imams to Europe, especially on the occasion of Ramadan, to minister to Moroccan emigrants. Migrant sending states such as Morocco and Turkey have clear reasons to uphold this tradition: it is a way to maintain ties with their expatriate communities, and to preserve the type of religious observance which they sanction. It is thus a check on the influence of both Western values and on Islamist forces emanating from elsewhere. Indeed, these government programs face considerable competition. Although not a source of emigrants, wealthy Saudi Arabia has played a major role in sponsoring the construction of mosques, Islamic centers and schools in Europe, and has supplied them with their own

imams. Moreover, there are many Syrian, Libyan, and Pakistani imams serving Muslim communities in Europe, preaching various ideologies and interpretations of Islam.

In Europe, the question has long been raised whether to tolerate the arrival of foreign imams. Many hold that the continuously renewed link with the homeland slows down the already arduous integration process. Additionally, if imams are obliged to follow instructions from a home government or some foreign financier, this could be considered a manifestation of foreign interference. But most of all, European governments have been concerned about the problematic position of foreign imams when it comes to advising the Muslim community living in Europe. Foreign imams are often unfamiliar with the European context, since they come for a few years and return to their home country afterwards. The question is whether these commuting imams – who live in the West only temporarily, who generally do not command the local language, and who are not integrated in the host society – can act as a leader of the community in the Diaspora.ⁱ These days, European Muslims are increasingly occupied with the question of how to balance their Islamic identity with being part of Western society. European governments envision a role for the imam in guiding Muslims in this process, building a bridge between society and the Muslim community, and also functioning as an official representative of the Muslim community vis-à-vis government institutions.

Programs to train local, European-born imams are guided by the perceived need to revise and expand the imam's task. A primary motivation to establish this type of education is the significance of commanding the local language and familiarity with the society in order to adequately serve the community.ⁱⁱ In fact, these two requirements are already part of civic integration courses (which foreign imams are obliged to take). But the new programs also include theological studies.

Indeed, the social role that the Europeans foresee for the imam can only be fulfilled if the religious function is fulfilled first. In Islam, the imam's standing and reputation derives first and foremost from his religious function and knowledge. Herein lays his potential ability to function as a bridge between the Muslim community and society.

European politicians and academics see the local training of imams as a way to promote a 'European Islam'. The definition of a European Islam is subject to discussion, but more or less involves a moderate Islam that respects human rights and the democratic systems of Western Europe – and is thus seen as wise integration policy.

But there are also security motivations behind this initiative. Notably, the focus on imams and their background has sharply increased since 9-11. Occasional but alarming reports about radical preaching, the growing popularity of *salafist* lectures, and *jihadist* recruitment in Europe definitely had their effect on the European public and caused governments to take steps against radical imams. For example, between 2001 and 2005, more than 25 imams were expelled from France, after having been judged as openly

advocating violence. In other European countries, imams have been jailed or stripped of citizenship.ⁱⁱⁱ Realizing that such punitive measures do not solve the problem in the long run, training imams is viewed as a more long-term, structural way to deal with the issue. One ultimate goal of training imams at local universities is to make the mosque more transparent and to exercise a measure of control over imam recruitment.

Thus, the initiative to introduce local imam education is intended as a tool by which European governments can combat radicalization of their Muslim populations. However, the successful introduction of imam education will not necessarily remove the problem of radical imams. Exaggerated expectations to this effect imply two presumptions: that foreign imams are the main source of radical-fundamentalist interpretations, and that local imam training will deliver moderate imams. In fact, the causes of radicalization among European Muslims are multiple and hardly as straightforward as being a mere consequence of imported, nefarious influences. The difficulties and discrimination facing European Muslims clearly constitute important sources of their alienation from society, leading some to turn to fundamentalism.

In addition, imams are generally not recognized solely on the basis of their formal education. Many Muslim communities elect an imam from their midst, for a variety of reasons.

Aware of this limitation, the initiators of academic imam programs have realized that coordination with Muslim bodies is inevitable and desirable. Of course, one can question to what extent an outside body should be allowed to interfere in the contents of an academic program. But in this case it is a requisite; not only to ensure that the course schedule and the acquired competencies meet the needs of the community, but also to ensure the eventual recognition of the degree that such a study program will grant. However, the major problem in working with 'the' Muslim community is its heterogeneity. Although Muslims in Europe have generally organized themselves according to ethnicity, even within these ethnic groups there is no agreement about religious practices and interpretations.^{iv} The divisions within most European Muslim communities render it impossible to fashion one academic program that would satisfy all groups. The lack of unified representational bodies will not only make it difficult to create a job description for the imam – it will also influence the legitimacy of the education in the eyes of those it is designed to serve.

Despite these challenges, European countries with large Muslims minorities such as France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Sweden are experimenting with offering imam education in various forms, ranging from Islamic study centers to bachelor and master degrees at university level.^v The formal separation between state and church has also created obstacles for introducing religious study programs.^{vi} Nevertheless, the imam is an essential part of mosques and Islamic centers in Europe. European countries are increasingly looking for long-term solutions that address this reality in ways that will serve their security and societal goals.

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ⁱ For a typical reflection of the disconnectedness of foreign imams, see James Angelos, "Importing Germany's Imams" *Der Spiegel* (3 May 2010) <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,681948,00.html>

ⁱⁱ Welmoet Boender, "Imams in the Netherlands: an impression," *Centre for Islam in Europe* (18 December 2005) <http://www.flw.ugent.be/cie/CIE/boender1.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Natalie Malinarich, "Europe moves against radical imams," *BBC News* (6 May 2004) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3686617.stm> and Don van Natta Jr, Lowell Bergman, "Militant Imams under scrutiny across Europe," *The New York Times* (25 January 2005) <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/25/international/europe/25imams.html>

^{iv} As shown by the eternal rivalry between the Turkish Diyanet's mosques and followers of Islamist groups such as Milli Görüş and the Süleymanî movement, for example.

^v See Willem B. Drees, Pieter Sjoerd Koningsveld ed. *The study of religion and the training of Muslim clergy in Europe* (2008: Amsterdam University Press)

^{vi} For a discussion, see Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, "Islam at the universities in Europe. Religious education and education about religion," (November 2005) http://www.ku.dk/priority/religion/content/pdf/rapport_seminar_imamudd..pdf