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Erik Bleich

Online Publication Date: 01 March 2009

To cite this Article Bleich, Erik (2009) 'Muslims and the State in the Post-9/11 West: Introduction', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 35:3, 353 — 360

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13691830802704509
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691830802704509

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Muslims and the State in the Post-9/11 West: Introduction

Erik Bleich

Recent events have layered a security dimension on top of pre-existing concerns about Muslim integration in liberal democracies. The contributions to this collection address four central themes related to the emerging interactions between Muslims and states in contemporary Europe and North America: the timing of the securitisation trend in these countries; the types of state policy being produced; the effectiveness of different policies in managing the security and social challenges perceived by state actors; and the identification of relevant Muslim actors and their views on recent state policy developments. This introduction gives an overview of the authors’ positions in these discussions, highlighting points of convergence as well as areas of contention.

Keywords: Muslims; Immigrants; Integration; Policy-Making; Europe

Although Muslims have been a significant presence in many European and North American societies for almost half a century, they were seldom defined by their religion when they first arrived as immigrants. Instead they were typically viewed in racial, ethnic, national, economic or policy status terms—‘black’, ‘Arab’, ‘Turkish’, ‘guestworker’ or ‘asylum-seeker’. Yet the place of ‘Muslims’ in these countries has come under scrutiny over the past two decades, especially in the wake of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks. The Madrid train bombings of 11 March 2004, the assassination of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh in November of that same year, and the London transportation system bombings of 7 July 2005 have revealed intense anti-Western sentiment among a set of actors claiming a Muslim identity and a religious motivation. This in turn has contributed to a perception that such immigrants ought to be viewed in religious terms. Liberal democratic states and Muslim communities have responded to these developments with a series of steps that have brought them into closer contact than ever before.
Above all, the events of recent years have served to layer a security dimension over pre-existing concerns about immigrant integration that have been frequently posed with respect to Muslim communities in liberal democracies. While a series of excellent edited volumes and single-authored books have treated the topic of Muslims in Western countries, thus far there has been no systematic attempt to review interactions between Muslim minorities and a variety of liberal democratic states in light of the new salience of security concerns. Focusing on the security aspect to Muslim–state dynamics is vital to understanding contemporary politics. However, it also risks giving the impression that security should be the primary lens through which to view Muslims. To offset this risk, the authors of this volume’s essays display a variety of nuanced views toward the centrality of this dimension to Muslim–state relations in the current era. They address the consequences of recent violence, but often stress how contemporary Muslim–state interactions have developed in the context of pre-existing concerns, how they have at times been diverted into non-security (or non-traditional security) outlets, and the ways in which a focus on the security dimension is misplaced. Given the complexities of the interactions between Muslims and states in the contemporary era, what are the central questions that must be asked, how have different authors addressed them, and what broader debates or conclusions do they point to?

Four Questions: Multiple Answers

While these essays offer observations and analyses on many levels, it is possible to identify four core questions around which many of the contributions revolve. The first has to do with the timing of the securitisation of Muslim issues in liberal democracies. This collection uses the term ‘post-9/11’, yet it is important to emphasise that 9/11 is merely one highly symbolic turning point among many in this broader trajectory. A host of other developments, both preceding and following that tragic day, have served to increase the securitisation of the Muslim–state relationship in the West. In this sense, the term ‘post-9/11’ as deployed here denotes the era of new security concerns that inflects Muslim–state relations rather than indicating a sharp break in worldview and policy-making that has hinged on any particular date.

Often, authors explicitly emphasise developments prior to 9/11 as critical for understanding the dynamics they analyse. My own comparative overview of six countries roots contemporary policy developments in a broader context of associations between Muslims and violence that have become widespread since the late 1980s. John Bowen examines the deepest historical roots of Muslim–state relations in France, going as far back as the thirteenth-century reign of Philip the Fair, but placing special emphasis on the mid-1990s bombings in France. Christian Joppke argues that the relevant timeline for understanding the limits of integration policy vis-à-vis Muslims in Britain dates, at the latest, to the invention of the term ‘Islamophobia’ in the late 1990s. Frank Buijs, who finished his contribution just
before his untimely death, picks up this theme in highlighting the relevance of longstanding Dutch integration policies to the current situation in the Netherlands.

Several authors also stress the effects of 9/11, 3/11, the van Gogh assassination, and 7/7 on the relationship between Muslims and states in Europe and North America. Ihsan Bagby notes the mixed influence of 9/11, which ratcheted up the pressure on American Muslims to integrate, but which has done little to affect their actual levels of acculturation or ongoing reluctance to fully assimilate. Shamit Saggar, Jytte Klausen, Peter Mandaville and Frank Buijs note the beginnings of change in European policies—especially with regard to counter-terrorism—following 9/11, but also the even more consequential effects of actions on European soil, such as those in Madrid, Amsterdam and London that followed a few years later. Together, the contributions in this volume serve to reinforce the point that a security dimension has been layered onto pre-existing concerns about integration, melding with parallel worries about immigration, crime and the public’s association between Muslims and violence. Authors suggest that a rolling series of events has contributed to the current dynamics, with some events—particularly domestic ones—weighing more heavily on certain policies and public responses than others.

The second question asks what kinds of state policy are emerging in this new context. My own article distinguishes between three overlapping types of state response, which can be summarised as policies that deflect, repress and integrate (whether by enabling or compelling integration), and shows that each of the six countries examined has thus far demonstrated a balanced approach that includes all three elements. In a similar fashion, Klausen, Bowen, Buijs and Joppke also touch on the balance between repressive and integrative policies, although each puts a slightly different emphasis on the nature of the balance. For example, Bowen highlights the attempts by French authorities to ‘send a message’ to Islamists that they will not be permitted to threaten the Republic, while striving to ‘bring into the daylight’ those Muslims who have felt marginalised. Joppke discusses repressive policies, but focuses more attention on British efforts to reach out to Muslims with what he calls attempts at ‘soul-making’ integration policies less intrinsically tied to security issues. By contrast, Mandaville emphasises the more restrictive policies being put in place in Britain following 9/11 and 7/7 with regard to transnational Muslim ideas and activists.

Debates about the relative weight of different policy responses are central to these analyses, but they hardly exhaust what is interesting about recent developments. For example, Klausen’s detailed discussion of community-based counter-terrorism in Britain illustrates how an effort to work with Muslim communities (or at least Muslim leaders) came about as an attempt to head off terrorist action, thereby revealing how a security challenge has led to a hybrid security/integration response. Saggar reveals a significant shift in British thinking in recent years toward an emphasis on what he has called the ‘circle of tacit support’ for terrorism, and advocates for policies aimed at this group as a means of reducing the likelihood of activist recruitment and of successful attacks. In addition, Buijs mentions controversial Dutch efforts to draw social actors (such as youth workers, teachers and
midwives) into surveillance of Muslims. Finally, Mandaville identifies a movement in Britain away from cultivating national-level interlocutors and toward focusing on ‘moderate’ local and regional groups, in a way that runs counter to France’s attempts to bring divergent Muslim groups under one national representative umbrella.

While there are significant cross-national differences in the policies implemented, it is also noteworthy that there are some broad similarities across a range of countries. What may be particularly surprising to some is a common trend not only toward surveillance, repression and compelled integration, but also toward outreach, communication and efforts to enable integration among Muslim minorities. There is a counter-intuitive nature to responses that ‘accommodate’ what easily could have been seen—and sometimes is seen—as a security threat within national borders. It suggests that policy-makers hold a more nuanced approach toward the security implications of religious diversity than may have otherwise prevailed, even if many of the authors emphasise the limits of states’ abilities to recognise all of the critical nuances within and beyond their borders.

Third, it is important to ask how effective different kinds of policy have been at managing the security and social challenges perceived by state actors. While it is too early to offer a comprehensive assessment, the authors of this volume provide frameworks and appraisals that push toward answers. Sagar distinguishes between policy slingshots (those that strike very narrowly at targeted problems) and policy boomerangs (those launched that subsequently return to strike the initiator). He argues for more sensitivity to Muslim perspectives in order to minimise the boomerang effect of counter-terrorism approaches. By contrast, Joppke is critical of outreach policies in Britain, claiming that they lead to dissatisfaction among Muslim minorities who demand ‘respect and recognition’ in ways which the state cannot fulfil. He and Bowen see more positive outcomes in France (although Bowen voices reservations about aspects of French policies), where actions have resulted in fewer tensions between Muslims and the state than in Britain. Klausen, although sceptical of community-based counter-terrorism efforts in Britain, argues that they are clearly superior to what she deems ‘a greater threat to Muslims’ civil liberties’ that prevails in France. Mandaville criticises the British tendency to avoid conservative Muslims in search of ‘moderates’ as an approach that pushes conservatives further away from the mainstream and that may wind up haunting policy-makers in a boomerang fashion.

As should be clear, there is a lively debate among these authors about the relative merits and drawbacks of British and French policies in the post-9/11 world. Both countries offer positive lessons, and both offer cautionary tales. It is important to pay attention to the subtleties of each country’s varied policies, in order to avoid oversimplifying either model or viewing them as polar opposites. Each country utilises forms of repression and strategies of integration. These take different specific forms and have distinctive weights and thus need to be assessed not only in comparison with each other, but also compared to approaches of other countries.
The final core question asks who the relevant Muslim actors are, and how they view the state and react to state policies. Mandaville begins his essay by explicitly problematising the concept of ‘Muslims in Europe’, seeking to avoid the production of images of a ‘monolithic, undifferentiated and—in socio-political terms—artificially unified religious community’. He identifies four major currents of socio-political orientation among British Muslims: liberal-pluralist, communal-pluralist, communitarian and radical. Many of the authors in this collection similarly break down the category of ‘Muslim’ into analytically useful sub-groups. In the US context, Bagby divides the American mosque-going community along a number of salient dimensions—ethnicity, immigrant status and socio-economic background—and identifies five ‘Islamic approaches’ (echoing the types of distinction made by Mandaville): contextualist, conservative, traditional, Salafi and secularist. Buijs offers the broad distinction between democratic and radical Muslims, and then develops a tripartite distinction among the narrower range of radical/Salafi Muslims between purists, politicos and jihadis, arguing that the first two groups may actually serve as a barrier to terrorist actions rather than as the commonly supposed stepping-stone.

Apart from distinguishing between the ideological orientations of various Muslim groups, a number of authors emphasise other relevant dimensions of difference. By highlighting the centrality of those in the ‘circle of tacit support’ for terrorist actions, Saggar juxtaposes the group to ‘those who are peaceful and non-violent’ and ‘those who are closely involved in violence’ in order to highlight the very different types of policy needed for each group. Klausen reminds us that there is often a meaningful divide between Muslim leaders willing to negotiate with the state and other Muslims who may not follow the purported leaders, suggesting limits to the effectiveness of state actions aimed primarily at those leaders. And Klausen and, especially, Mandaville emphasise the importance of the transnational dimensions of Muslim identities and networks in order to suggest that national actors often, but not always, have strong ties to ideas or people beyond their country’s borders.

Muslims’ views of the state are necessarily complicated, given the multitude of relevant sub-groups within each state, yet several authors provide assessments of Muslim attitudes based on available data. Survey research cited by Bowen and Joppke reveals the relatively positive views of French Muslims toward their state and society as compared to the relatively negative ones of British Muslims. This may strike many readers as unexpected, given that the British state has been much more active in reaching out to minorities than has France. Saggar summarises the main currents of Muslim ‘humiliation and grievance politics’ in order to shed light on why those in the circle of tacit support may look the other way instead of preventing an act of terrorism or turning in guilty parties after the fact. Having conducted and reviewed the relevant surveys on American mosque-goers since 2000, Bagby provides a rigorous interpretation of US Muslims’ attitudes to their state and society. He demonstrates that American Muslims on the whole are acculturating to life in the United States—they are broadly supportive of a stronger role for women in the mosque and of Muslim participation in the political process, and a majority
agree that ‘the US is a better country than most other countries in the world’, a quintessentially American point of view.

The authors are therefore virtually unanimous that ‘Muslim’ is too broad a category to capture what is most interesting and meaningful about Muslim–state relations in the post-9/11 era. However, the variety of sub-categories outlined in this collection suggests that it is useful to conceive of a series of potentially critical fractures within the Muslim community (both within and across countries): across ideological tendencies, between those prepared to reject, condone or participate in terrorism, between leaders willing to work with governments and leaders and followers who are not, between immigrants and their native-born children, and along a host of other fault lines. There may be salient sub-categories worth paying attention to in all countries, but it may be just as useful to reflect on how to distinguish between relevant sub-groups in a given country at a given time for a given purpose (i.e. for researchers to understand particularly aggrieved populations, or for states to better target particular policies at specific groups). In other words, rather than developing a standardised list of sub-groups that applies to all contexts, reflecting on the relevance of the divisions outlined in this volume is likely to prove more useful.

Another key point that emerges from the fourth question revolves around the nature of ‘Muslim’ responses to state policies. Comparing the findings of Joppke, Mandaville and Bagby reveals a tension that calls for further investigation. Joppke’s argument suggests that British outreach toward Muslims has engendered demands for respect and recognition that the state cannot fulfil, and attributes British Muslims’ relatively negative views of the state to this conundrum. Mandaville, somewhat by contrast, suggests that British moves, following 7/7, to seek out ‘moderate’ Muslims (for which the bar is set quite high) have sidelined what Muslims view as ‘mainstream’ leaders, thus pushing many toward more conservative stances, precisely because of what Joppke might term a failure of respect and recognition. In spite of arguing that American Muslims have also felt the brunt of suspicion and scrutiny in the wake of 9/11, Bagby’s evidence shows no discernible move toward isolation or conservatism in the United States. Under what circumstances do state policies—whether attempts at outreach or restrictive moves to cultivate only selected interlocutors at the potential expense of others—generate positive, negative or indiscernible responses among Muslim communities? This appears to be one of the most vital issues for the future of Muslim–state relations and the absence of a consensus on this point is striking.

Further Research

While the four questions posed above have generated some common answers, they have also opened up the terrain for further research and debate. In particular, additional research is required on countries like Spain, Germany and Italy, covered here in my own comparative article, but deserving of stand-alone treatments.
Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Greece, Canada and Australia, each with their own significant Muslim minorities, also merit deeper treatments in a comparative perspective. Alongside research on a greater number of locations, it is vital to place the Muslim–state dynamic in the broader context of discussions about immigrant integration, race relations and church–state relations, as some of the contributions to this volume explicitly do. Together, they seek to highlight key questions and to stake out positions on the dynamics between ‘Muslims and the state in the post-9/11 West’. We hope they serve as a useful point of departure to advance public, political, policy and scholarly reflection about this area of emerging and critical importance.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Middlebury College—and in particular the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs—for the funding, staffing and support to host the conference from which the contributions to this collection have been drawn.

Note

[1] A select, but necessarily incomplete, list includes Abdo (2006); Bowen (2007); Cesari (2004); Fetzer and Soper (2005); Haddad (2002); Haddad and Smith (2002); Hunter (2002); Kepel (1997, 2004); Klausen (2005); Laurence and Vaisse (2006); Maréchal et al. (2003); Modood (2005); Muñoz (1999); Nonneman et al. (1996); Roy (2004); Vertovec and Peach (1997).

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