

Muslim Integration in Europe – could we learn something from the United States?

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States criticize each other. This is hardly remarkable, especially in a world of globalization, where the consequences of political decisions do not stop at national borders. However, one country castigating another for its failed integration policy is still rather exceptional. Exactly that is what happened in April 2006, when Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary in the US State Department, criticized Europe for its poor integration of Muslims. In European countries even the second or third generation of Muslim immigrants would still be conceived as foreigners, Fried said, while in the US they were acknowledged as equal US-citizens. Although Fried arguably did not have the well-being of European Muslims in mind (his concern was with the potential for spreading extremist thought) - he has a point.

Of course, the integration of Muslims in the US and Europe has occurred under different conditions. The first generation of Muslims immigrating to Germany in the 1960s and 1970s generally came to Europe from a rural background. As so-called 'guest workers' they took over the relatively unskilled, physically demanding jobs, like factory and construction work. The United States, however, has always attracted the better-educated immigrants from all parts of world. America's Muslims are well educated and their economic success is higher than average. In Germany the opposite is true. Unemployment of the Muslim population, among them many of Turkish origin, is above average. The same applies to the school drop-out rates of the second and third generations.

But this is only one side of the coin when we try to understand the successes and failures of economic, social and political participation of Muslims in Europe. The other reflects the basic differences in the prevailing political culture between the two regions. Unlike Americans, Europeans still have great difficulty identifying even second-generation immigrants as fellow citizens. Europe has the tendency to define them by ethnic origin, colour or religion. The expression "a Turk with a German passport" is a particularly telling example of this mentality. Only German citizens, obviously, can hold German passports, but the tendency still exists to qualify citizenship with another nationality or ethnic origin (in this case 'Turk'). On the other hand, in the US hyphenated or hybrid identities are commonly accepted. Furthermore, the emphasis when employing these identity categories - whether African-American, Turkish-American or Italian-American - is placed on 'American'. In other words: American citizen first, ethnic heritage second.

It is crucial that we change such public attitudes in Europe if we are going to create an atmosphere in which immigrants and their children can more easily identify with their adopted countries and these countries can demand loyalty in return. We should not point the finger of blame at government failures and ignore the fact that immigrants and their organizations have responsibilities in the process, too. Nevertheless it is clear that, if we want to make progress, European states must first change their political culture and develop what the French call *républicanisme*, which sees the individual first and foremost as a citizen, regardless of his or her ethnic origin, identity or religion. The United States offers us a shining example of this.

As a second step, Europe must acknowledge the fact that Muslims are not the homogenous group so often presented in politics, public discussion and the media. There are conservative Muslims, liberals, fundamentalists and secularists. There are women who wear headscarves and women who do not. Many Muslims fast during Ramadan and others never have but still consider themselves as Muslim. And then there is the 'Muslim atheist', another contradiction in terms which has been making the rounds, but is just another absurd attempt to label immigrants by their ethnic or religious origins. At the end of the day, recognizing the diversity found within European Muslim communities would help to bridge the gap between Muslims and their adopted countries - and would help make the migrant communities feel that they belong. It is a precondition for establishing basic dialogue with Muslims and their representatives, and a foundation upon which cooperation can be built. Furthermore, by understanding the distinctions within Muslim communities, we would be better placed to identify groups and individuals who might become bridge-builders and those black sheep, especially among young people, who will resist integration.

Thirdly, Europe's political future needs conservative parties that embrace immigrants, particularly the growing Muslim population. In the US both Republicans and Democrats actively appeal to minorities and immigrant groups for support (think of the value an endorsement from the National Council of La Raza has to

a candidate for political office). By contrast, European conservative parties such as Germany's Christian Democrats will call themselves advocates of European integration, but will remain sceptical of immigrants even if they are naturalized citizens - and able to vote. Still, even in 2008, the thought of European conservatives seeking the votes of Muslims remains somewhat surreal. Yet traditional European conservative voters have much more in common with many Muslims than they care to admit - for example, an emphasis on traditional, family-oriented values. As the number of voters of immigrant or Muslim background grows, they become a potentially crucial electoral force. Take some of the recent close election results in Germany - one might even argue that it was the immigrant vote, and among them many Muslims, that determined the outcome.

Finally, Europe's Muslims should seek to become recognised actors in civil and political life. Here, too, immigrant or Muslim organizations in the United States could serve as useful models. Migrant associations in Europe must learn to shift their focus away from the politics of their homelands and become more serious and respected political players in domestic policy areas. Italian-American associations in the US are not very concerned about resolving the most recent government crisis in Italy. They look to advise their members on civic engagement in their local communities. Similarly, if Turkish parents in Germany wish to ensure a brighter future for their children, they would be better off learning the names of the children's teachers than the names of political backbenchers in Ankara. And locally engaged immigrant organizations could even help to protect the interests of these children (and their parents). Intergenerational change within these organizations will become a key indicator of successful integration throughout the whole of Europe in the years ahead. If successful, we will see individuals in positions of leadership who were born and raised in Europe and therefore have the social as well as cultural capital to play the political game.