

Localizing Islam in Europe: Religious Activism among Turkish Islamic Communities

Written by Ahmet Yukleyen

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AHMET YUKLEYEN, APR 10 2012

This article examines how organized religious life among nearly five million Turkish Muslim immigrants contribute to localization of Islam in Europe, which refers to the reinterpretation of Islamic texts (Quran and Hadith) in accordance with the local conditions. Islam has universal religious principles, but Muslims practice them in particular times and places, which makes a level of blending with the local conditions inevitable. More specifically, localization involves a reinterpretation of Islam in accordance with the concerns and needs of Muslims while abiding by the laws of European states.

Adaptation of religious traditions to new environments is not novel; however, localization of Islam in Europe receives particular attention because popular essentialist beliefs purport an inner incompatibility between Islam and Western, secular, and liberal democracy. Some scholars suggest that Islam is the new “other” of “the West,” in conflict with freedom, liberty, and democracy. Political scientist Samuel Huntington suggests that global politics will be dominated by the “clash of civilizations” and Islam will replace Communism as the “other” of the Western world.[1] Historian Bernard Lewis supported these projections with historical evidence on an inner incompatibility between Islam and Western liberal democracy.[2] He argues that the textual sources and historical development of Islam is inherently inimical to freedom, liberalism, and democracy. This inner structure of Islam will not change over time and is not adaptive to Western liberal democracy. These arguments have taken root in public debates on Islam in Europe, especially in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

This paper challenges the essentialist argument that Islam and liberal democracy are incompatible and instead puts forth a contextual approach to examining how Muslim minorities practice Islam in Europe. This contextual approach acknowledges that Islam is a social phenomenon that becomes what its adherents make of it in each social context.[3] This approach emphasizes the inner diversity and adaptability of Islam, particularly as it relates to modernity, liberalism, and democracy.[4] This does not suggest a total relativism, but instead a negotiation between the universal principles of Islam and the particular circumstances of Muslims.

European Islam: One or Many?

In the 20th century, Muslim minorities emerged in Europe largely due to decolonization, labor migration, asylum from conflict, and the pursuit of higher life standards. One million or more Muslims live in France, England, Germany, and the Netherlands, and they are also present in the rest of Europe. Beginning in the 1960s these countries imported labor from Southern Europe (i.e. Greece, Italy, and Spain), Southeast Asia, North Africa, and Turkey for reconstruction after the Second World War and to bolster the booming economies. As a result, there are now approximately fifteen million Muslims in Western Europe.[5]

These Muslims negotiate the universal and particular aspects of Islam in the European context. However, if this negotiation process is not detailed and empirically supported, the analysis of Islam’s development in Europe can be misleading. For instance, some scholars propose the emergence of a monolithic “Euro-Islam,” which is a form of Islam assimilated into secular European public sphere.[6] This “Euro-Islam” limits itself to the private sphere, is pursued as an individual form of spirituality, and assures peaceful Muslim participation in European cultural

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pluralism. European political authorities support this model and call for the development of “French, German, or Dutch Islam” in their respective countries.

However, this is a normative projection, functioning as a “model for” Muslims to adopt, rather than a descriptive or analytical “model of” how Islam unfolds in Europe as a social phenomenon.[7] There is limited empirical evidence to support the case for secularized “Euro-Islam.” The normative and optimistic projection of a monolithic Euro-Islam has been defied with the persistence of radical voices[8] including violent acts committed in the name of Islam such as; the Madrid train bombings (2004), the London subway attacks (2005), and the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands (2004).

Who Speaks for Islam in Europe?

Neither the essentialist argument about the incompatibility between Islam and liberal democracy nor the rise of a monolithic and assimilated “Euro-Islam” can account for the diverse religious experience of Muslims in Europe. Islam does not develop in a monolithic form. While the majority of Muslims and Islamic organizations are tolerant, marginal Islamic organizations maintain radical views. Islam is neither inherently antagonistic to European values nor assimilated, as the term “Euro-Islam,” suggests; but is practiced in multiple ways, such as political Islamism, Sufism, and Salafism. These competing forms of religiosity create an Islamic pluralism in the European public sphere.

These various forms of Islam are represented through Islamic organizations and their specific responses to their European settings. Even if the majority of Muslims and Islamic organizations are peaceful, marginal groups such as Jihadists are pro-violent in the name of Islam. Islamic organizations refer to clusters of associations, foundations, institutes, informal study circles, media outlets, and educational institutions through which each interpretation of Islam is produced and disseminated. Even if an Islamic organization has limited support among Muslims, it can persist through its institutions mentioned above, which results in a diversity of Islamic interpretations in Europe.

Islamic organizations do not transplant religious extremism from their countries of origin, nor do they necessarily conform to all of European liberal values. Rather Islamic organizations play an intermediary role, negotiating between the social and religious needs of Muslims and government policies on immigrants and Muslims. Localization of Islam requires external factors such as multicultural policies that provide the “opportunity space” for Islamic organizations and Muslim identity to be recognized within the public sphere.[9] However, as the Dutch and British cases illustrate multiculturalist policies alone can not guarantee the containment of pro-violence networks and Islamic organizations. Internal factors such as young leadership and religious activism play a role in the localization and politicization of Islamic organizations’ religious discourse.

This article examines how Muslim young leadership and Islamic activism localize their religious interpretations in Western Europe.

The “Young Turks” of Europe

The children and grandchildren of first generation immigrants from Muslim majority countries constitute the second and third generation Muslims hereafter referred to as the young Muslim generations. These young generations grew up and socialized in their European surrounding. They enjoyed better educational standards than their parents and have had more opportunities for upward mobility.[10] Despite their better quality of life in comparison to their parent’s and grandparent’s experiences in the Netherlands, they lack the benefits that their non-immigrant peers enjoy. Unemployment among Turkish and Moroccan Muslims is two and a half to more than three times higher than the rate for native Dutch citizens with the same level of education.[11] Nonetheless, Turkish Muslims have higher expectations than their parents. The first generation’s goals were to earn money to invest in their country of origin and eventually return home. They considered their move temporary and did not have much contact with Europeans outside of the work place.

In addition, young generations of Sunni Muslims in the Netherlands have a greater attachment to the Netherlands than Turkey. The younger generations feel less connected to Turkey than the first generation immigrants. Unlike their

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parents, they prefer spending their visits to Turkey on the beaches and at historical sites, rather than in the villages of their parents. They are more fluent in Dutch than Turkish. They are also more sensitive to social and institutional discrimination.[12] Because of their high expectations for recognition and upward mobility, the younger generations have greater resentment and less tolerance for social discrimination.

By the 1990s, after years of ambivalence about building their homes in Europe, Turkish immigrants realized that they were in Europe for good. Second generation Muslims become oriented toward the Dutch society. This recognition prompted questions about how to develop a religious identity that is compatible with their non-Muslim environment. The emergence of second generation leaders in Islamic organizations in the Netherlands has changed the questions and concerns of Islamic organizations.[13] New leadership redefines the focus of Muslim organizations in terms of their relationship to the larger society in Europe and not according to political debates in Turkey.

Islamic organizations provide religious and social services according to the needs and concerns of Muslim constituents. Before the 1980s, members of the first generation were founding places of worship and using Islamic organizations to influence politics in their countries of origin. They regarded Islamic organizations as a place for themselves to be secluded from the larger society. However after the 1990s, with the emergence of the second generation, Muslims began asking for religious services that related to their European experiences such as: passing on religious and cultural values to younger generations; getting public recognition for Islam; and raising the socio-economic status of Muslims. They expected their financial support of Islamic organizations to return more directly themselves, rather than to a country they had lost hope of returning to.

The changing demands of the young generations changes the questions they ask to their religious authorities as well. In the 1980s, religious authorities did not permit buying houses with home loans arguing that it violated Islamic prohibition of rib'a or financial interest. However, in the 1990s, the plans for permanency increased and the pressure on imams and religious authorities to use home loans increased, which resulted in the reinterpretation of the rib'a prohibition. One of the arguments for the new ruling has been that it is a "necessity" or *darurah* to have a house. Most Muslims no longer question to use bank loans as they settle in Europe and make it their new homes.

Younger generations also acquired greater influence in the administration of the Islamic organizations. Institutional representation of these organizations in the public sphere and vis-a-vis official authorities required skills that second generation immigrants had—language, education, and knowledge about the official procedures and paperwork. Second generation Muslim leaders redefined the priorities of Islamic organizations priorities and worked to improve their position in Dutch society.[14]

Nevertheless, young generations cannot easily gain leadership positions within Islamic organizations. First of all, age is an important sign of status and it is challenging when young organizational leaders try to establish authority over whole communities. Moreover, second generation Turkish Muslims are usually trained in fields like economics, medicine, law, or engineering rather than theology or religious studies. So, even if they are willing, they do not become religious experts as easily. The current leadership of Islamic organizations interprets Islamic sources and develops strategies of religious activism to serve "Europeanized" younger generations on the one hand, and fulfill the official regulations for immigrant and religious institutionalization in the European public sphere, on the other. Islamic organizations also mobilize young followers as volunteers for their social and religious activities. Young followers shape and are shaped by Islamic organizations, and Islamic organizations develop multiple European forms of Islam to adapt to the changes in their constituencies.

Islamic Activism for Integration

Islamic organizations engage in religious activism, which they call *hizmet*. *Hizmet* refers to serving the larger society, Muslim community, and Islam, and it is the ultimate goal and socio-religious obligation for Islamic organizations. Islamic organizations vary in their choice of activities, target groups, and strategies. Despite some overlap, each organization specializes in a primary field of activism that consumes most of its financial and human resources. The working principles of these various fields shape their Islamic interpretations and religious authorities in localizing Islam.

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Two major Turkish Islamic organizations provide religious and social services that promote the social, economic, and cultural integration of Muslims. Milli Görüş works in the public sphere and the Gülen community focuses in education and interfaith dialogue. Each organization's primary field of activism consumes most of its resources thus creating group distinction and claims of superiority over other organizations. The differentiation among the Islamic organizations leads groups to justify their activities through the prioritization of a particular field of activism. Despite the commonalities, Islamic organizations are in competition with one another through their services and activities.

***Hizmet*: Serving God, Islam, and the Community**

Human resources of Islamic organizations largely depend on volunteers. Islamic organizations call all of their religious and social services *hizmet*. Rallying volunteers is a challenge and Islamic organizations use concepts with cultural and religious meanings such as *hizmet* to recruit. Public debate exists over which type of activity is the best or most needed form of *hizmet* for Islam today and specifically Muslims living in Europe. Islamic organizations give different answers and each group regards their answer as the best. In this way, they justify their existence and raise funds through the services they provide to Muslims. This concept forms the basis of self-justification for the internal diversity of Muslims in Europe. It legitimizes in religious terms the competition among Islamic organizations.

Hizmet also cuts across religious and secular divisions because serving God, religion, and society are all combined in this concept. In my conversation with a Gülen community activist, I asked him how giving math courses to young students could be considered a religious activity. He replied that the activist's intention becomes the determinant of whether the activity is non-religious or religious. If one works with the intention of serving God and Islam, then teaching math is *hizmet* and a sacred activity.

Each Islamic organization focuses on a certain field of activism, and the most valuable form of *hizmet* changes according to current conditions. This is why the religious authority defines which type of *hizmet* is the most important at any given time and place. Next, I examine the role of Muslim youth and religious activism among the Turkish Islamic organizations in Europe to understand the localization of Islam in Europe. Here, I will provide two cases of Islamic activism that promotes integration, defined as a process of becoming an accepted part of society (Penninx 2003).

Milli Görüş: Public Identity Politics and European Islam

Milli Görüş is a political Islamic movement founded in Turkey by Necmettin Erbakan in 1969. Erbakan's political agenda was to use the democratic system to come to power and change public behavior to be in accordance with Islamic law. In 1996, Milli Görüş movement came to power, but after two years the military establishment, the defenders of the laic regime in Turkey, pushed Erbakan-led Welfare Party out of government. Milli Görüş organization in Europe expedited reformulating their agenda in accordance with the needs of Muslims in Europe after the failure of the political Islamist project in Turkey.

Milli Görüş claims to have 87 thousand members in Europe.[15] After the 1990s, the expectations from the followers of Milli Gorus has shifted from changing politics in Turkey to responding to the new needs and priorities of Muslims as a settling immigrant community such as getting their identity recognized in public life. The basis of Muslim identity politics is to be recognized as an equal community to other religions in Europe, such as Christianity and Judaism. They demand to be able to teach Islam in public schools in Germany where other religions already teach their religions from a confessional point of view. The legal cases over headscarf ban in France and Germany, minaret ban in Switzerland, and mosque-building controversies are examples of how Muslims want to be recognized as an equal member of the European society. Although these issues have raised a stir in public debates, they also testify that Muslims' priority is to be accepted by their societies of residence rather than countries of origin. They demand to be included into the landscape of Europe and become visible.

This involvement in public life brings negotiations over controversial religious interpretations as well. For instance, weak players seek allies to gain political leverage in public sphere. In the Dutch political arena Milli Görüş searches for allies to defend the interests of the Muslim minority. These alliances are fraught with unknown risks and

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unanswerable questions. What are the limits of such alliances? Should they ally themselves with leftists, atheists, or Muslim-friendly gay individuals? When young leaders of Milli Görüş posed these questions to Arif Ersoy, a professor from Turkey who has some clout within Milli Görüş movement, he replied that there is no reason not to.[16] A high religious authority from North Federation added that if one reads the story of the Prophet Lut, a historical tribe that engaged in homosexual relationships, they were not destroyed because of their homosexuality, but because they forced the prophet's visitors (angels sent by God) into homosexual relationships. Thus, the religious authority concluded, one can cooperate with homosexuals as long as they do not force anyone into homosexual relationships.[17]

Mufti Ünye of North Milli Görüş told me about the discussion within IGMG fatwa council on the right of Muslim woman to marry non-Muslim men. In traditional Islamic law, men are allowed to marry non-Muslim women, but Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men. According to the Mufti, the reasoning behind this rule has been that in a family where the mother is Muslim and father is non-Muslim the Muslim upbringing of children is not assured. However, he defended the right of Muslim women to marry non-Muslims, explaining that previously men had the last say in the upbringing of children, but this is no longer true. The women often have equal say, if not more control than their husbands, and in addition educational institutions have a significant impact on the upbringing of children. Mufti Ünye concluded that under these circumstances it should be religiously permissible for Muslim women to marry non-Muslim men. He added that the debate within the council has not been settled, but that for now they have decided to promote the traditional rule of allowing only Muslim men and not women to marry non-Muslims.

The Gülen Community: Embodiment of Universal Islam

The Nur movement is a global Islamic phenomenon that aims to combine science and religion based on the Quranic exegesis of Said Nursi (1876-1960), *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* (Epistles of Light Collection). There are currently three major and a dozen smaller religious communities that take Nursi's writings as their interpretative framework for Islam.[18] The three major groups are Yeni Asya, Yeni Nesil, and the Fethullah Gülen communities. The community under the leadership of Fethullah Gülen (1938) has grown to be the largest among them serving more than two million students at more than one thousand high schools worldwide.[19] They have close to two hundred tutoring centers in Germany alone.

The Gülen community has established a global network in media, business, and especially education. They have engaged in interfaith dialogues with an ecumenical and tolerant Islamic discourse, and Gülen met with the Pope at the Vatican in 1998. The Gülen community concentrates on two types of religious activism in Europe: education and interfaith dialogue. For instance, the Islam and Dialogue Foundation (*Stichting Islam en Dialoog*) in the Netherlands is inspired by Gülen's commitment to interfaith dialogue.[20] This group meets with Christians, Jews, and non-religious individuals to reflect on each traditions, sacred texts, and experiences living as devout believers in a secular world. They also discuss approaches to such social issues as religious violence, peace, and the environment. These meetings have a variety of outcomes, some expected and others not as I detail in my book.[21]

First of all, the interaction in interfaith dialogue makes Muslim activists appreciative of other religious and philosophical traditions because the conversations create a mirror effect. Muslim activists learn that followers of other traditions want the same things such as peace, justice, and clean environment, albeit in different ways. Secondly, it brought about the realization that bearing witness to the truth of Islam effectively means embodying its message in the universal language of good works in everyday life, rather than through preaching.[22] Thirdly, the activists suggest a different way of interacting with the "other," such through as neighbourly relations based on spatial proximity rather than *dawah*, or call for Islam, which is based on difference in belief in the context of interfaith relations.

Therefore, Islamic activism in interfaith dialogue leads to a pluralistic approach to non-Muslims. Although interfaith dialogue may be initially motivated by a desire to call others to Islam, the multicultural experience transforms the activist, making him or her able to appreciate other humanist and religious ways of life. Furthermore, interfaith dialogue leads activists to find models within Islamic tradition to use for tolerant relations with non-Muslims. Thus, the unexpected consequence of interfaith dialogue is the transformation of Muslim activists' understanding of Islam into a

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more tolerant and pluralist one. In other words, Islamic tradition is reinterpreted to support the arguments for interfaith dialogue and tolerance. This multiculturalist attitude fits with Muslims' search to define their place in a pluralist European setting.

Conclusion:

Turkish Islamic organizations provide religious and social services to the Muslim community in Europe in multiple realms of their lives—Milli Görüş operates in the public and political sphere and the Gülen movement provides education and interfaith dialogue. Each field of activism has its own rules of engagement that socialize its participants. Activists in these various fields consequently learn different social techniques and strategies to serve the needs and concerns of Muslims in Europe, and in the process they reinterpret Islamic sources and make them relevant to Muslim presence in Europe.

In Milli Görüş and the Gülen Islamic organizations new leadership has room to form and speak out on behalf of Islam in Europe. The rules of engagement in the public sphere lead the Milli Görüş leaders to form Islamic interpretations in order to subvert stereotypes of Islam as oppressive of women, intolerant, and pro-violence. The experience of interfaith dialogue transforms Gülen community activists from outreach activism into living embodiments of universal ethics practiced through activities such as pursuing neighborly relations and virtue in everyday life.

The comparison among Turkish Islamic organizations suggests that those organizations that are the most committed to the changing needs of Muslims—including the public recognition of Islamic institutions, youth education, and pluralist Islamic discourse—and interested in accomplishing a non-confrontational relationship with state authorities will rise as the strongest among the religious organizations. Milli Görüş and the Gülen community have a comparative advantage because their fields of activism provide them with the dynamism to respond to the changing needs of Muslims. Thus, the more these religious organizations engage in local fields of activism, address the needs and concerns of new generations of Turkish Muslims, and bridge the Muslim community with larger European society, the more local their interpretation of Islam becomes. Although it may still be early to talk about a distinct “European Islam,” the diverse activism among Turkish Islamic organizations indicates that Islam is incrementally but surely localizing in Europe.

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Ahmet Yukleyen is Croft Associate Professor of Anthropology and International Studies at the University of Mississippi and a 2011-2012 senior fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He is the author of *Localizing Islam in Europe: Turkish Islamic Communities in Germany & the Netherlands* (Syracuse University Press, 2012).

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[3] Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

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- [6] Bassam Tibi 'Euro-Islam: The Quest of Islamic Migrants and of Turkey to Become European in Secular Europe', *Turkish Policy Quarterly* Vol. 3, No.1, 2004.
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- [11] Ellie, Vasta 'From ethnic minorities to ethnic majority policy: Multiculturalism and the shift to assimilationism in the Netherlands', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 30, Issue 5, 2007, pp. 713 – 740.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] Kadir Canatan, *Turkse Islam*, Rotterdam: NA, 2001.
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] General Secretary of Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Görüş, European headquarters of Milli Görüş, Oğuz Üçüncü, gave this figure during annual meeting on May 30th, 2004 in Kerpen, Germany.
- [16] Interview, Amsterdam, February 24 2004.
- [17] Interview, Amsterdam, February 24 2004.
- [18] Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
- [19] Soner Cagaptay, "Behind Turkey's Witch Hunt"
<http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/05/15/behind-turkey-s-witch-hunt.html>
- [20] For their latest interfaith dialogue activities visit <http://www.islamendialoog.nl>.
- [21] Ahmet Yukleyen, *Localizing Islam in Europe: Turkish Islamic Communities in Germany and*

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the Netherlands, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse.

[22] This fits with Gülen's message to uphold *temsil* (exemplification). He calls his followers to exemplify the virtuous and pious living in Islam in deeds rather than preaching.