

Reports

The status of Imams in Europe

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In his opening statement, Jan Grauls referred to a project initiated two years ago by the King Baudouin Foundation to promote dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. Two reports had been commissioned by the KBF steering board. The first focused on an assessment of the situation of mosques in Europe, their role and the status of their Imams. The second report, drafted by Jean-François Husson, specifically analysed the situation of Islam in comparison to other forms of worship in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, the UK and Sweden.

In the first report, the training of Imams had emerged as an important topic. Currently, no training was available in Belgium despite requests from the Belgian Muslim community for Imams to be educated in the context of European Islam. Imams in Belgium were also financially worse off, said Mr Grauls. Islam had been recognised in Belgium since 1974, but Imams were still not given state grants. This contrasted with state funding for other clergymen, which in itself was an exceptional situation compared with other EU countries.

Mr Grauls concluded by saying that while there was widespread consensus that Imams working in Belgium should be allowed to be trained there, it was up to the Belgian Muslim community to define the profile of an Imam's functions as well as the preconditions for the job.

The training of Imams as a tool toward better integration

As a German Member of the European Parliament of Turkish origin and with a culturally Muslim background, Cem Özdemir argued that now was not a very comfortable time for those in favour of multicultural societies.

After the crisis of the 'no' votes in France and the Netherlands in the EU Constitutional Treaty referenda, the whole EU enlargement process had been called into question. This would, of course, have implications for the largest candidate country in line to join the Union, Turkey, where religion also played a role in the decision.

Mr. Özdemir said that when it came to talking about European Muslims, the picture was complex. This was because the exact number of Muslims in each country was unclear and the Muslim community was split into several different confessions and nationalities. The generational question also came into play, as older generations of Muslims in Europe felt strongly linked through the diaspora to their roots, while second and third generations were more likely to embrace European values and take up European citizenship.

When it came to the training of Imams in Europe, Mr Özdemir said that people should not allow fundamentalists to rule the debate. However, now that so many Muslims were citizens in European countries, the state should provide funding and infrastructure to educate Imams. This was particularly important when it came to languages, as many Imams did not speak the national language, which hindered greater integration and complicated inter-religious dialogue.

Imams educated in European societies and in modern Islam could play a crucial role in integrating Muslims in society, he said.

A comparative perspective across Europe

Jean-François Husson presented his report, outlined earlier by Mr. Grauls, comparing the situation of mosques and Imams to other religious groups across the EU. He said attitudes varied immensely in different European countries.

In terms of funding for clerics, Belgium provided state grants for recognised religious groups, although Imams still did not qualify for funds. Secular France, on the other hand, did not provide any money for any religious leaders. This situation was similar in the UK, where no direct subsidies were provided for vicars in the official Church of England. Germany had limited funding, for example for chaplains in hospitals, and this was provided through a national church tax.

Estimates of the number of Muslims living in Europe also varied enormously, said Mr. Husson. The largest number were in France, where around 8% of the population is believed to be Muslim. This was followed by the Netherlands on 5.7%, Belgium on 4%, Germany on 3.7%, and the UK on 2.7%. The countries of origin of these populations was also quite different, although a large number of immigrants came to the EU from Turkey (except in the UK).

The picture was no less varied when it came to the training of Imams, explained Mr Husson. France had established institutes for some official religions such as the Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions, but Islam was not recognised or funded. However, there were some initiatives to help with language and citizenship training.

In the UK, religious training was affiliated with universities, but Islam still had limited recognition. However, there was a will in the UK to fund more Islamic research, with the creation of a centre for the study of Islam at Cardiff University.

In Germany, the training of Imams was recognised in cooperation with institutes and universities, similar to the situation in Sweden. In the Netherlands, each religious denomination had precise rules on the training of its own clerics and the training of Imams was recognised. This was in conjunction with a compulsory citizenship course similar to the one which existed in the Flemish regions of Belgium.

Mr. Husson said a key question that needed urgent attention was the requirements for training. There were also outstanding questions about how the training of Imams should be organised. Fundamental to these issues was language education, as many Imam candidates did not speak the language of their host country.

For the training of Imams in Europe to improve more generally, Muslim communities had to come up with specific criteria and the authorities had to provide incentives such as tax breaks.

A view from the Netherlands

Reflecting on the current situation regarding Islam and Imams in the Netherlands, Timke Visser said the Dutch government was engaged in a dialogue with two recognised Muslim groups, which served the Muslim community in the Netherlands. There were currently three million Muslims in the Netherlands, mostly from Morocco and Turkey.

The first, and largest of these groups was the CMO, which represented 500,000 mainly Sunni Muslims. The second, the CGI, represented 115,000 Muslims with an Alevite, Lahore Ahmadiya, Sunni and Shia background.

The training of Imams could roughly be divided into three categories, with the Diyanet method was not recognised by the government because of foreign influence. Training under the two other methods was provided through universities and other institutes. The ministry of education had provided €1.5 million to the University of Amsterdam for a six-year training course for a Masters in Islamic Chaplaincy. This would start in September 2006 and 20 students had enrolled thus far.

There were also additional pilot projects for Imam training, in conjunction with religious groups, with subsidies for these programmes amounting to €400,000. However, government money would only be available on provision of a declaration of intent, setting out the level of education, the curriculum, investment in women and the young, and stating that there was no investment from abroad.

The changing needs of Europe's Muslim communities

Jocelyne Cesari said the question of Imams was very much related to the minority condition of Muslims in Europe. Most Muslims came from places where Islam had very organised structures, where clerics were civil servants and had clearly defined tasks in a hierarchical system. Depending on the issue in question, Muslims would turn to the mufti or the calif, and not necessarily the Imam, who was at the bottom of the scale.

When Muslims came to Europe, this structure no longer existed because of their minority status, which meant that Islam in Europe had evolved from the grass-roots level. The role of Imam often fell to the most educated person in a particular congregation, leaving him with a very difficult multi-tasking role. Most were volunteers and did not have the skills to do this. Few had the right training in Islamic studies.

Addressing the question of what kind of training should be available, Ms Cesari said psychology should play a big part. Most Imams were not credible for the younger generation because they were trained in their country of origin and could not relate easily to the country they were now in. This often left young men and women who had integrated or were born into Western societies feeling disassociated from the service provided by Imams.

There are essentially two types of training available: training in countries of origin, such as Turkey, Morocco or Algeria or through transnational organisations and movements. The former often fell short, said Ms. Cesari, as this type of training did not match the needs of a Muslim minority in Europe.

A third point highlighted by Ms Cesari was the quasi-automatic association in Europe between religious conservatives and radicals. This was dangerous for Muslims, especially in the post-9/11 era. Just because some Muslims were conservative did not make them combatants for the Jihad. Europeans had to be clear about whether they wanted to build a credible Muslim minority or whether they were only concerned with security issues.

Ibrahim El Zayat said looking at Imams was only part of the challenge in addressing the issue of Islam in Europe. Firstly, he agreed with previous speakers that there was a big problem with statistics, as the current figures on Muslim communities in European countries were not very precise and research was very limited. Agreeing with Ms. Cesari's last point, he said that Islamophobia was also a problem and Muslims were too often seen as a threat. The issue of integration was a big challenge both for the minority and the majority populations in Europe.

Previous speakers had failed to address the situation in Eastern Europe, said Mr. El Zayat. The number of Muslims there was much larger than in many parts of Western Europe. Among the Council of Europe countries with a total population of 800 million, 200 million were Muslim. As a result, many countries in the East, such as Kosovo and Albania, already had clear Muslim structures.

Of the Western European countries, Austria was, in Mr. El Zayat's view, the best example of how to deal with Islam as a Western society, not least because it had officially recognised the religion in 1908.

He agreed with previous speakers who had pointed out the variation in the quality of Imams, underlining the point Ms Cesari had made about how Imams in the Muslim world were in one of the least regarded professions. In Egypt, becoming an Imam was the only means of higher education for those pupils with bad exam results. In Europe, it was also one of the worst-paid professions, with an average monthly salary of just €500-€1,000.

