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Islam and Turks in Belgium

Communities and Associations

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New Directions in Islam

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract The introduction explores the scope of the research, ethnographic method, and the concepts of community (*cemaat*) and association (*cemiyet*) within the Islamic and European contexts. The research deals with Turkish Muslim organizations. In Belgium and Europe, these organizations are created as nonprofit associations (*association sans but lucrative*, ASBL; *vereniging zonder winstoogmerk*, VZW). Mosques and prayer houses are integrated into these associations. As these associations and federations are built by religious communities, it is methodologically necessary to study organizational and historical features of Islamic communities in local, trans-regional, and global levels, and then analyze the meanings, motivations, and outcomes of their collective actions.

Keywords Methodology • Muslims • Europe • Community • Association

Islam impacts political, social, and cultural issues in Europe. In Belgium, most Muslims are of migrant backgrounds from Morocco or Turkey. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date when Turkish immigration began in the country, though the fiftieth anniversary of the first immigration wave was celebrated in 2014. Despite frequent mentions of 1963 and 1964 as the start of this process, some immigrants arrived a few years earlier. This research does not deal with immigration, but rather religion in the Turkish

community in Belgium. Though religious fact exists sometimes within the context of immigration, it is a different research matter.¹

Historically, Muslim populations in Europe were not formed exclusively through economic immigration as we know it today. Muslim Berbers and Arabs settled in Europe during the Andalusian conquest from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. The Ottoman Turks conquered part of the European continent, namely the Balkans up to the surroundings of Vienna. The presence of these two empires was the outcome of Islamic dynasties' territorial conquests. During the twentieth century, Muslim Africans and Maghrebians settled in Europe following French, British, and Dutch colonization. Thus, these contexts of immigration represent a kind of physical conflict. Turkish immigration did not result from a process of confrontation; it was based on an immigration agreement between the Belgian Kingdom and the Turkish Republic signed in 1964.

First-generation immigrants were men from central Anatolia. They were escaping poverty to settle in rich industrial regions that offered the possibility of work in Belgium. These individuals tended to be culturally conservative and religiously pious. Their intentions were primarily economic: paying their debts, buying real estate, and gaining prestige and social status. They hoped to eliminate their Anatolian villages of poverty. Most immigrants realized these desires. Nevertheless, the idea of returning, almost universal in the early days of immigration, rarely manifested in actual migration back to Turkey. The fate of these men and women was influenced by several factors and conditions, rather than the simple desire to return to their homeland. Consequently, most of these immigrants did

¹In the West, Muslim populations, including the Turks, were first studied through the perspective of immigration, with almost no attention paid to religious dynamics. The category of immigrant is nowadays less important than the religious category when studying diasporas in Europe. Immigration has long-term effects, and the religious effect is among the most crucial. Concerning studies on Turkish immigration in Europe, see, among others, Nermin Abadan-Unat, *Turks in Europe. From guest worker to transnational citizen*. New-York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2011; Stéphane de Tapia, Paul Dumont, Alain Jund (eds.), *Enjeux de l'immigration turque en Europe*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995; Isabelle Rigoni, *Mobilisations et enjeux des migrations de Turquie en Europe de l'Ouest*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2001. Unlike most scholars, Werner Schiffauer is interested in the religious lives of Turkish immigrant people. Schiffauer Werner, "Migration and Religiousness" in T. Gerholm and Y.G. Lithman (eds.), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, London and New York, Mansell, 1988, pp. 146–158.

not return to Turkey.² This book will examine the interplay between religion and other aspects of immigrants' lives. They founded associations and mosques, and organized cultural and religious activities in Belgium, showing the importance of religion among the Turkish population in the country.³

SCOPE OF RESEARCH: QUESTIONS, ISSUES, AND CONTEXTS

This research specifically examines Islam in the Turkish community in Belgium. This is a vast domain, as the religious field is entangled with the fields of economy, culture, politics, and education. The organizations examined herein are those with primary or secondary religious goals, which overtly engage either in Islamic activities or activities with strong religious overtones. In Belgium, Islamic movements are organized as non-profit associations (*association sans but lucrative*, French abbreviation ASBL; *vereniging zonder winstoogmerk*, Dutch abbreviation VZW; association without lucrative purpose in English). Each mosque has an ASBL or VZW, but every association is not necessarily equipped with a mosque. Thus, this research concerns the associative space that intersects most of the time with religious, social, and cultural space.

The research is inscribed within a temporal framework, as it seeks to study the past, present, and future that characterize every human practice. The notion of future refers not only to the relationship between present and future, which is essential to understanding any action, but at the same time to the projections of individuals in the past toward their futures. For example, the desire to return to Turkey of the immigrant mine workers⁴ who settled in Belgium in the 1970s and 1980s represents a relationship to the future in the past. Henceforth, “temporality” will be used to indicate the complex relationship between people and the various times in

² Belgium has a population of about twelve million. At least 450,000 Turkish-speaking people live in the country.

³ The quantitative research conducted by Torrekens and Adam confirms this fact. In their sample, they show that 91.5% of Turks define themselves as Muslims, and 78.8% go to the mosque. Corinne Torrekens and Ilke Adam, “Belgo-Marocains, Belgo-Turcs – (auto)portrait de nos concitoyens,” Brussels, Fondation Roi Baudouin, 2015, pp. 53–54. www.kbs-frb.be/fr/

⁴ For a study of Turkish immigration in the coal industry, see Mazyar Khoojinian, *Les Turcs à la mine. L'immigration turque dans l'industrie charbonnière belge (1956–1970)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Editions EME, 2018.

which collective actions occur. This concept has been referenced by Sartre as men and women's "real relations to the past, and the future,"⁵ and by Bourdieu as "the inexorable passage of time and [...] axiomatic trait of practice."⁶ Indeed, time orientates people's behaviors by imposing limitations and resources.⁷ It defines the frame and rhythm of Islamic action, interaction, and mobilization.

This study has two aims. First, to assess Turkish Muslim organizations from a historical and geographic perspective in order to understand the implications of their networks and activities. Second, to construct a thesis based on a set of common transversal themes within these organizations.

This field of study seeks to provide balanced analysis among the micro, meso, and macro levels of the following question: Why do (immigrant) men and women engage in religious activities? As the study progresses, similar questions will be asked to understand different interdependent factors, such as: What is the organizational structure of Islamic movements? How are they related to each other and what are the outcomes of collective Islamic actions? As shown later, the reasons, freedoms, and constraints of religious people can be explained only in a complex configuration of interrelated networks.

While the topic and question of this research deal with a plural context, the study itself was conducted in a specific and difficult context. In Belgium, there is a particular relationship between religious organizations and the federal government.⁸ The federal government recognized the Muslim faith in 1974. The state adopted a law to nominate imams and has begun recognizing mosques as valid institutions within associations since 2005. The Muslim Executive of Belgium (*Exécutif des musulmans de*

⁵ Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Vol. I), Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 63.

⁶ Richard Jenkins cites Bourdieu. See Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 69.

⁷ For this perspective on temporality, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique; précédé de Trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*, Genève, Droz, 1972, and Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu, op.cit.*

⁸ Policies toward Muslims in Belgium have not been static. Such policies have evolved over time and are characterized by emergent Muslim claims to public space and reactions by Muslim organizations to Walloon and Flemish policies. For more information about these dynamics, refer to Ayhan Kaya, *Islam, Migration and Integration. The Age of Securitization*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 93–115; Ayhan Kaya and Ferhat Kentel, *Belgian-Turks: A bridge or a breach between Turkey and the European Union? Qualitative and quantitative research to improve understanding of the Turkish communities in Belgium*, Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, 2008.

Belgique, EMB),⁹ an institution developed by the government in 1994, plays an intermediary role in this process of recognition. Indeed, the federal government acknowledges and pays imams upon the proposition of the Executive, which prepares a file of recognition including information on the status of the ASBL, the record of worshippers (at least 200 worshippers required), a financial assessment, and the assignment of the building as a place of prayer.¹⁰ As such, federal validation of the imam or mosque happens in an interactive context between the Muslim organizations, the EMB, and the Belgian state. This context is extremely fluid, and involves different processes of inclusion, exclusion, conflict, and cooperation which give rise to new issues, like the question of imam training in Belgium.

There are other topical contexts that complicate field work on Islam in Europe. Although this research is not exclusively based on topical issues, these contexts, at times, made it difficult to conduct the research. My field work began in December 2015, just after the November 13 attacks in Paris, and continued through the March 22, 2016 attacks in Brussels. This was also a period where Turkey and the Muslim world went through bloody conflicts such as the Kurdish and Palestinian insurgencies and the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Though this study does not concern political radicalism and violence, these events contributed to the subjective experience of the people observed or interviewed, and resulted in anxieties around participants expressing themselves.

Nonetheless, the difficulty of this sort of research does not solely lie in fragile and delicate topical issues. Conducting a field study on Islam or any religion is delicate work. It is challenging to initiate vulnerable and genuine conversation around experiences, thoughts, and religious feelings. Indeed, religion is both a personal and intimate matter and a collective one. All of these factors can affect the quality of results, but the researcher has successfully carried out a consistent study, as the following research methodology shows.

⁹The EMB is an official and intermediary institution between the Belgian state and Muslim organizations. It is composed of fifteen elected members. The most important functions of the EMB are the recognition of mosques, albeit the final decision remains in the hands of the federal state, and the designation of Islamic religion teacher in schools. <https://www.emb-net.be/fr/presentation-de-linstitution>

¹⁰<https://www.embnet.be/fr/reconnaissance-des-mosques-en-region-wallonne>. For an article on the EMB, see Caroline Sägesser and Corinne Torrekens, « La représentation de l'islam », *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP*, n° 1996–1997, 2008/11, pp. 5–55.