

Milwaukee School of Engineering

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SS-458: Contemporary European Society & Government

# **Under Siege**

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The Biblical book of Genesis tells the story of God's promise to Abraham to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). Because his wife, Sarah, was barren and he didn't trust God's provision, Abraham had relations with Sarah's maidservant, Hagar. She gave birth to a son, who was named Ishmael. However, when Sarah became pregnant by Abraham and gave birth to their son, Isaac, Ishmael and his mother were cast out (Genesis 16, 21). Isaac became the forefather of the Jews and Ishmael the forefather of the Arabs. The rivalry between these two half-brothers has continued through the present day and plays a large role in the current conflict over the state of Israel. The ramifications of this age-old struggle are not limited, however, to conflict in the Middle East. In recent years, the conflict has begun manifest itself in Europe as well. Over the past three decades, immigration of Muslims from North Africa, Turkey, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has resulted in a European Muslim population triple what it was thirty years ago (Franken, par. 14). The common inability to distinguish between peaceful, democratically-minded Muslims and Muslim extremists has complicated the process of Muslim integration into European society. Non-Muslim Europeans' feeling of being under siege by Islam fosters in them a reluctance to accept their Muslim neighbors as European citizens and is used to justify restrictions placed on and mockery of Muslims' traditions and religion, thus leading Muslims to also feel under siege.

People generally resist change. When Irish and German immigrants came to the United States, many conflicts arose between these foreigners and those who called themselves "Americans." Many Europeans feel a similar apprehension as a result of the large number of Muslim immigrants moving to Europe. This hesitancy to accept Muslim immigrants as Europeans is compounded by an uncertainty as to what Islam represents. Just as the term "Christian" is used to refer to people with varying degrees of faith in the Bible, so also Muslims

hold to their faith and the Qu'ran to varying extents. The fact that Muslim extremists bombed New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 in the name of Islam cannot be denied. However, the sentiment of these terrorists is clearly not shared by all Muslims. German-born Kadriye Aydin claims that Islam and democracy *can* cooperate. She believes that one can "be both a Muslim and a European who believes in democracy" (Mulrine, part 2, par. 4). Other European Muslims take a different stance. In a 2002 Time article, Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon explain that a "militant Puritanism is on the rise" in Europe (Benjamin and Simon, par. 4). This form of Islam is far less inclined to find a common ground with other Europeans, and instead "demands universal application of Shari'a, asserts the superiority of Islam and rejects assimilation with non-Muslim societies" (Benjamin and Simon, par. 4). The fear that the influence of radical Islam would be intensified throughout Europe were Muslims to play a larger role in society compels many Europeans to treat Muslim citizens less cordially than non-Muslim Europeans.

The superior attitude of many Muslims often takes on a more subtle and less militant form but offends Europeans nonetheless. Though he opposes the use of violent measures, Shaker Assem, a German representative of Hizb ut-Tahrir (an Islamic Liberation Party), doesn't go so far as to share Aydin's belief in European democracy. He expresses his desire to see implemented a version of the caliphate that was around from Mohammed's day until the early part of the twentieth century. He admits, "People who say that there is a conflict between Shari'a and Western democracy are right" (Chu, par. 11). Although he believes that eventually Europeans could adopt a political and economic system similar to the caliphate – one that seeks a middle ground between socialism and capitalism – his admission that it contradicts those values that lie at the core of European sentiment and law provides sufficient proof that it is simply an

unreasonable demand (Chu, par.13). One of the requirements for membership in the European Union is that a nation must have a democratic government and a functioning free-market capitalist economy. Therefore, it would be absurd to ask Europeans to abandon their democratic, capitalistic ideals that have been in the making for centuries to this foreign idea introduced by this strict group of Muslims.

It also comes as no surprise, then, that non-Muslim Europeans react to Muslims as they do. Ideas contrary to those to which Europeans hold fast pose a threat to the very foundation of European ideals. This perceived threat has woven its way into the threads of European society and is used as justification for a proclivity to anti-Muslim attitudes. Europeans exhibit these sentiments through discrimination, harassment, and disdainful remarks and insinuations, as demonstrated by the publication of derogatory cartoons of Muhammad in a September 2005 edition of Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Mulrine, part 1, par. 4; Bright, par. 3). Islamic studies professor Jorgen Nielsen explains that many Europeans “are worried by the rise in [the] fundamentalist nationalism” manifested in the attitudes and actions of a significant population of European Muslims (Franken, par 12). Europe’s history with extreme nationalism and the role it played in both world wars substantiates this fear. The fascist ideal that took hold of Europe during the Second World War played on strong nationalist sentiments and on an attitude of superiority to justify the slaughter of six million Jews.

This threat is played out not only in the political arena but also with regard to religion. Nielsen goes on to comment that Europeans are concerned “not just about Islam but the return of religion to the public space” (Franken, par. 13). Indeed, religion plays a small role in Europe. More Muslims in Britain attend prayer on Fridays than Christians attend church on Sundays, and Muslims only account for a fraction – three percent – of Britain’s population (Franken, par. 19).

Likewise, only three percent of the largely Lutheran Danish population attends church on a weekly basis (Omestad, part 3, par. 5). Although religion doesn't play a large role in the day-to-day lives of Europeans, the region is known for having a strong Christian influence. Many Europeans fear that with the growth in Muslim immigration, there will be an increasingly stronger Muslim influence in politics, society, and culture, to such an extent that Europe could potentially no longer be identifiable as Christian (Franken, par. 20).

Justified or not, the fear that Muslim ideology will trample upon Christian, democratic, capitalistic European ideology has prompted many non-Muslim Europeans to take action, both through laws and through de facto practices. One particular issue that has been debated significantly is that of the hijab, the traditional head scarf worn by many Muslim women (Tzortzis, par. 1). Although some European nations do not look so unfavorably upon the donning of the hijab, several nations have restricted the right to wear it. Students in some French schools have gotten expelled for refusing to abstain from wearing the hijab when asked (Crumley, par. 1).

Actions and attitudes hostile toward European Muslims extend far beyond limitations on dress. Significant harassment of Muslim occurs in Europe on a daily basis. In 1999, 35 percent of European Muslims polled considered themselves to be at the receiving end of discriminatory actions and harassment. In just six years this percentage has more than doubled and has reached 80 percent. Arzu Merali, director of research for the Islamic Human Rights Commission, concluded from the survey results that "Muslims feel under siege" (Mulrine, part 1, par. 4). This large increase is likely due to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States. Anne Sofie Roald, a Swedish woman who converted to Islam 25 years ago, expresses regret that many Muslims feel a sort of "guilt by association" (Chu, part 3, par. 7). Journalist Thomas Omestad

explains that harassment is often manifested in small ways, such as through “snide comments or being bumped on buses, being barred from night clubs or followed by department store security officers – or the ‘what are *you* doing here?’ stares in coffee shops” (Omestad part 2, par 5).

Additionally, European Muslims suffer from rampant unemployment, substandard health, and poor literacy. It is challenging for Muslims to do anything about their predicament, as their representation in all European governments is minimal, if present at all (Benjamin and Simon, par 5).

The unforgiving attitude of many Muslims toward their European harassers prompts them to reject friendly efforts made to assimilate them into the culture, thus furthering the conflict. In many cases, this rejection is not militant but is rather a simple disinterest in associating with non-Muslims. When they don’t find support from non-Muslim Europeans, many Muslims turn to their own. Kadriye Aydin captures this attitude succinctly: “OK, you don’t want us, you don’t accept us; we go back to our community” (Mulrine, part 3 par. 1). This isolation does not serve to weaken but rather to strengthen the faith of many Muslims (Mulrine, part 3 par. 1). In other instances, the response of Muslims is more radical. Some Muslims use the actions of Europeans against them as fodder to fuel the fire of hatred against Europeans. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon comment, “By mirroring the de facto separatism fostered by European attitudes, radical imams have created fertile ground for the recruitment and protection of terrorists” (Benjamin and Simon, par. 4). Whatever the response, Muslims’ cold-shouldered, unforgiving attitude toward Europeans and their rejection of the assistance that non-Muslim Europeans do offer continues the trend of anti-European sentiment. As a result, non-Muslim Europeans feel more threatened and respond with frustration, and the cycle of conflict, the several-thousand-year feud of which Muslims have been a part, persists. Any solution to the

matter takes someone or a group of individuals who are willing to respond with compassion and kindness to their “enemies.”

Aside from the differing religious and political beliefs that characterize the contention between non-Muslim and Muslim Europeans, the conflict mirrors that which is occurring between American citizens and Mexican immigrants to the United States. Like some Europeans, many Americans feel under siege and perceive that their culture and language is threatened by the influx of Mexican immigrants. The common American sentiment that “Mexicans should return to Mexico” is not unlike the opinion expressed by one Dane who commented that “Muslim people should be in a Muslim country” (Omestad, part 2, par. 1). Just as second or third generation Mexican Americans are more assimilated into U.S. culture and society, there is hope that European attitudes will follow a similar trend. According to Anne Sofie Roald, her children “have the religious way of Islam and the Norwegian view of society” (Chu, part 3, par. 12). This is evidence that peace between these two conflicting groups can be obtained.

British Muslim convert Tim Winter balances the concerns of both non-Muslim and Muslim Europeans well: “It is not xenophobic for Europeans to be genuinely worried about the radicalization of Islam. But it is not acceptable to say that Islam cannot adapt to European life” (Franken, par. 18). With effort and understanding on the part of both parties, the needs and wishes of Europeans, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, can be satisfied.

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