

Islamic Institutions in the West: Bridge Builders or Boundary Markers Between Muslim Immigrants and Their Host Societies?

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While the predominant realist paradigm in international relations treats inter-state conflicts as the major source of security dilemmas, it is important to recognize that both societal instability and inter-communal ethnic or religious tensions within a state can be a significant obstacle to domestic, regional and international peace and security. The post-Cold War history is replete with intra-societal conflicts, which resulted from socially constructed cognitive demarcations of ethnic, religious or racial in-groups and out-groups, and antagonistic cultural and historical meta-narratives about ‘the other’. By far one of the most influential meta-narratives in effect today is a presumed clash between the Western and the Islamic civilizations. Many scholars have paid attention to the ways in which this meta-narrative has influenced foreign policy decisions of Western governments towards Muslim majority countries. But an equally important -and largely overlooked- question is how this same narrative affects the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims who reside side by side within Western societies.

Changes in patterns of migration in the second half of the 20th century have led to the rise of multi-religious communities in Western Europe and North America. As part of this change, Islam has emerged as one of the fastest growing religions throughout Europe and the US. Because religion has a significant impact on people’s perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, this shift in the demographic composition of western societies has brought to the fore questions about the compatibility of Islamic values with “western” life style. In particular, following the events of 9/11 in the US, and the killing of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, the ‘clash of civilizations’ narrative has engendered suspicions about the ability and willingness of Muslims to be part of the western societies, and the possibility of peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

In an effort to understand the factors that contribute to peaceful and harmonious coexistence within multi-religious communities in the West, my dissertation examines the ways in which Islamic institutions¹ either act as bridge builders or boundary markers between the Muslim immigrant community and the larger host society in Southern California and Amsterdam². In particular, I pay attention to how different mosques and Muslim immigrant

¹ In this research Islamic institutions refer to formal organizations such as mosques and Muslim immigrant associations, and the informal norms, rules and meaning-making structures these organizations provide for their participants and members.

² I chose to focus on the US and the Netherlands as my two case studies because both societies have experienced major shifts in their political discourse towards Islam/Muslims after 9/11 and both have implemented major immigration policy changes as a result. Due to space constraints I refrain from providing additional information on how the two cases compare in terms of their political and religious structures, institutionalization of Islam within their borders and the status of their Muslim immigrants. I will be happy to provide a more detailed description of my two cases and about the specific mosques and immigrant associations I have examined in each country, if needed.

associations facilitate or hinder successful integration and active participation of Muslim immigrants into their host societies, and whether or not they initiate inter-faith dialogue and encourage inter-communal interaction between their congregation and the non-Muslim communities.

My research builds on the central hypothesis that institutions are important agents of socialization in the sense that the norms, routines and collective narratives produced by these institutions shape the identities, interests and choices of individuals and define appropriate forms of social conduct. In addition, the resources provided by institutions can empower and enable individuals and groups to take action on and overcome existing prejudices and stereotypes, and reshape negative dominant discourses. Following this framework, I argue that Islamic institutions in the US and the Netherlands can play an active role in shaping the way Muslim immigrants' interpret and practice Islam, as well as their meaning-making structures and their perceptions of the self in relation to the larger society.

In the past two years I have interviewed clients and founding members of various Muslim associations, and the religious leaders (imams) and the congregation of various mosques in Southern California and Amsterdam³. My preliminary analysis indicate that some of these institutions encourage their members/congregation to actively participate and contribute to the social, cultural and political environment they live in, thus facilitating successful integration/acclulturation of Muslim immigrants into their host societies, which is an integral first step towards community building. These institutions also set the stage for inter-faith dialogue and inter-communal communication between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, paving the way for a more peaceful and harmonious social dynamic. I found other institutions in this study to be more interested in treating the "home sickness" of immigrants. Their main goal is to reproduce their culture and values to ensure that their children grow up with these values. These institutions use most of their resources to replicate an environment that looks like "back home". This type of institutionalization of religion might be less productive from the perspective of community building, successful integration and inter-faith dialogue. The main question that remains to be answered is 'which factors determine what type of institute one will become?' Is it the ideology and the vision of the individual founder(s) or the religious authority (the imam) that determine the outcome? Or is it the characteristics of the participants/congregation that define the mission of the institution? Or does the political structure of the host state affect the way Islam is institutionalized in different settings? More analysis of the data is necessary to answer this question.

³ In Southern California, I focus on three mosques (the Islamic Centers of San Diego, Irvine and Los Angeles) and four Muslim associations (Council on American-Islamic Relations-CAIR; the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services; The Muslim Women's League; and the National Islamic Society for Women of America), and in Amsterdam I have studied two mosques (one Turkish and one Moroccan) and two Muslim immigrant associations (Milli Gorus (an Islamic based political-welfare service organization) and Turk Kadinlar Dernegi (a secular Turkish women's association)). More information about the missions, resources and activities of each organization and the demographic and ideological composition of participants/members will be provided upon request.