



Muslims in Europe

The Nation
Europe
22/8/04

BY NADIA MUSHTAQ ABBASI

On July 28, after the three months truce with Europe to demand that European troops leave Iraq and Afghanistan was over, a statement posted on an Islamic web site from an al-Qaeda-linked group, Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades, threatened "waterfalls of blood" in European cities because the continent didn't respond to the demands to withdraw troops. This news indicates the threat faced by Europe in the coming days. This also puts to question the status of the 20 million Muslims in Europe. As it seems, these Muslims are definitely going to be under the limelight in the present circumstances.

The tragedy of September 11 sparked increased questioning about Islam as a global force. Perhaps more than any other religion, Islam is often associated with the violent acts of extremism, terrorism and the oppression of women. And perhaps more than any other religion, the combination of the lack of information and the plethora of distorted information are responsible for western ignorance about Islam and Muslims and the perception of Islam as a threat to Western civilization.

The horrific attacks had the consequence of pulling the rug out from under the Muslim communities and individuals in Europe, who now suddenly appear to be outsiders. There is much news about the harassment of Muslims. There are concerns about the growth of the Muslim communities in Germany, France, Belgium and Britain.

In Europe, a population of around 20 million Muslims has over the last decade made Islam the second biggest religion in Europe. It is important to recognise that there is not one but many Muslim communities in Europe. In Britain, which has around 1.6 million Muslims, Pakistani Muslims are the largest group followed by Bangladeshis. In Germany and the Netherlands, Turkish Muslims predominate.

also has an influence on Islam in those countries of origin. It is not possible to understand the modern history and social evolution of Europe without taking into account its Muslim component as it is not possible to understand the history and social evolution of Islam without taking into account its European component.

The European governments also have to consider the role the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the situation in the Middle East is playing in shaping perceptions in Europe and the Muslim world. Arguably, the short lapse of time since 9/11 has not shown a new variant of an old anti-Muslim prejudice in Europe, but a new turning of attention from cultural and religious factors to political ones, with a focus on Islam.

Also as a reaction to increasing multiculturalism in Europe, in the past couple of years, there has been a tremendous rise of the far right parties at the national level in Europe and the recent European Parliamentary elections also witnessed the increasing support for anti-EU and other far right parties in Europe. The rise of the far right in the EU has been attributed to anti-immigration. Their share of power at the national governments has also increased in countries with migrant Muslim population like Belgium, Austria, Netherlands, Britain, France, Norway and Denmark.

The issue of head scarves has been a prominent issue in Europe in the last decade or so, largely because of the way it developed in France and lately in Germany. Head scarves have never been an issue in Britain and the Netherlands, as there is a more liberal approach to accommodate Muslim women in workplaces, as well as special circumstances for children in schools.

European integration not only means integration within the European countries but also means integrating Muslim and other