

Europe's Muslims — getting the last laugh?

VIEW



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Until European governments stop projecting their Muslim communities as the next terrorist threat, it might not be a bad idea to let them fund Islamic places of worship. Once they do, they will be directly responsible for any instances of extremist preaching. The Muslim communities could then ask their governments to publicly distance themselves from the Islamic faith

religion. Indeed, the 9/11 atrocities and the Madrid bombings of March this year have resulted in a close scrutiny of Muslim communities throughout Europe. The fear is that they may provide safe havens and recruits to Al Qaeda. As a result, many European states are now actively monitoring the mosques set up in their countries as well as the *imams* who preach in them.

Is this justified?

France, with a total Muslim population of 5 million, has the largest number of Muslims living in Europe and is home to approximately 1,500 places of Islamic worship. Dr Dalil Boubaker, head of Paris' Grand Mosque and also head of the French Council for the Muslim Faith (CFCM), welcomes the idea of closer monitoring by the state, since he estimates that only 500 *imams* in France are credible. The rest simply preach their own agenda. He also points out that only 10 per cent of the *imams* are French nationals and with less than half conversant in the French language.

This has led to the French government wanting a mechanism for ascertaining whether or not its mosques are being used to preach religious hatred. Indeed, the CFCM itself was established in 2003 after the Chirac government urged the Muslim community to set up a quasi-regulatory body that it could liaise with.

The number of Muslims living in France has changed the perception of Islam being a foreigner's religion. This has prompted moves for the state to fund mosques and emphasise the need for 'home grown' *imams* *au fait* with the norms of democratic Western society and the traditions of the country. In short, the government wants a Europeanised Islam to be taught within its borders. Otherwise, it is feared, extremists from abroad will enter France and incite religious hatred under the guise of preaching Islam. Already, according to government figures, 27 Muslim prayer leaders have been deported since 2001 on public order or human rights grounds. More than half of them have been deported since July 2003.

However, many object to the monitoring of mosques and sermons. After all, France prides itself on being a secular nation and state interference in religious matters goes against the norm. Let us not forget that it is the same secularism the Chirac government was so intent on protecting that it banned the wearing of the Muslim *hijab* in state-run schools. Many Muslims rightly feel affronted that other religions have not courted the same level of state interference. While a diplomat-ic row recently erupted between President Chirac

and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon over the Israeli premier's concern over rising anti-Semitic feeling in France, (the latter invited all French Jews to move to Israel), most people still seek to differentiate between the Sharon government and the Jewish people. That is, whilst many condemn Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, none has called for labelling all Jews as terrorists.

Spain, too, is following the French example, a move seen as a reaction to the 3/11 bombings, the worst ever Al Qaeda attack on European soil. Interior Minister Jose Antonio Alonso believes that state funding of mosques will serve to loosen the grip of Saudi-sponsored *imams* whose Wahhabist vision of Islam is at odds with Western norms and values. However, former interior minister (under the Aznar government) Angel Acebes believes that the reintroduction of religious censorship contravenes the country's constitution. Indeed, it suggests a throwback to the Franco regime's tradition of no separation between Church and state. Thus many believe such a move could jeopardise Spain's own recent transition to democracy.

Muslims represent Britain's largest minority faith, constituting 3 per cent (or 1.5 million) of the total population. In London, Muslims account for 8.46 per cent (or 700,000) of the local population. The Blair government, for its part, has tried to engage the Muslim community in helping it fight the war on terror. Yet this engagement is based on appealing to the Muslim community to publicly distance itself from 'fundamentalist' views, as if Islam can only be understood within the context of moderation or extremism. This led to the Muslim Council of Britain contacting 1,000 mosques in the spring of 2003, urging congregations to maintain the 'utmost vigilance' against those who may have been using mosques as recruitment centres for extremists. Again, there have been no reports of synagogue leaders being urged to speak out against the acts of the Jewish state in regard to its persistent oppression of the Palestinian people.

Britain's most notorious *imam*, Egyptian-born Abu Hamza, formerly of the Finsbury Park mosque in north London, persistently called on his followers to take up the fight against the Western infidels. His sermons have no basis in Islam. Yet this has not stopped the government from urging its Muslim community to publicly denounce his teachings.

Many wonder why the cleric was not detained for inciting religious hatred. However, some feel that overt censoring of radical preachings simply pushes such groups underground, thereby making

it harder for the authorities to monitor their movements. Already, according to Magnus Ranstorp, (director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St Andrew's University, Scotland), 75 per cent of MI5 (Britain's domestic security agency) funds are channelled into combating Islamist terrorism.

Abu Hamza was recently detained on charges of belonging to the European branch of Al Qaeda. He is also wanted by the US Justice Department for a string of terrorism-related charges. And while it is just and right that he be detained for questioning, it is interesting to note that while the British government insists that the Muslim community distance itself from his preachings, they still go on to describe him as being wanted in connection with acts of 'Islamist' terrorism, thereby intrinsically strengthening the perceived nexus between Islam and terrorism.

Many believe that the calls to monitor Muslim places of worship do nothing to change the perception that this is, indeed, a war on Islam. They feel that it is a betrayal of all Muslims living in the West. They also feel that the constant discriminatory language and surveillance measures directed against a faith in supposedly pluralistic societies, suggests that European leaders are guilty of violating the very traditions and norms of democracy that they accuse the terrorists of being opposed to.

However, it cannot be denied that some mosques *are* used by those interested only in preaching religious hatred. And it must also be admitted that many clerics prey on those Muslims who feel marginalised from mainstream society and indoctrinate them with their version of the 'truth'. Indeed, there have been cases of British Muslims being recruited by such clerics and sent abroad for suicide missions, including two British Pakistanis sent to Israel for the purpose. Shoe-bomber Richard Reid, it has been pointed out, attended sermons at Brixton mosque in South London.

Obviously, individual cases are not representative of all who attend mosques on a regular basis. But until European governments stop projecting their Muslim communities as the next terrorist threat, it might not be a bad idea to let them fund Islamic places of worship. Once they do, they will be directly responsible for any instances of extremist preaching. And if this happens, the Muslim communities could then ask their governments to publicly distance themselves from the Islamic faith.

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PAKISTAN CONSTANTLY RECEIVES PUBLIC appreciation from America for its role in the US-led war on terror. President Musharraf's support is cited as evidence that this is not a war against Islam, but rather a war against terrorist networks intent upon targeting the underpinnings of democratic societies.

One would therefore expect Western governments to endeavour to remove the Islam-terrorism nexus with regard to their own Muslim populations. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

The expanded EU boasts a Muslim population of 15-25 million. Yet most member states seem to only focus on their Muslim populations when they call on them to be 'moderate' in practising their