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Reinventing integration: Muslims in the west

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Reinventing Integration

Muslims in the West

As the sixth year of the US-led war on terror rages on, it would appear that few constructs are more self-evident than the one dividing Islam and the West. Muslim minorities in the West are often scrutinized through this paradoxical prism. On which side of the divide do they fall? For pessimists, the signs do not look good.

The results of several recent polls have set off alarm bells in a tense Europe, still shaken by the July 7, 2005 bombings in London. For example, the Pew poll found that given a choice of identifying as first Muslim or Christian or as first a citizen of their country, the majority of British, French, and German Muslims choose faith, while the majority of British, French, and German Christians choose country. Some have taken these results as witness to the danger of over-accommodating religious differences. They have advocated that European Muslims be persuaded or forced to forsake their Islamic identity for a Western one. However, new findings from a Gallup study of Muslims in London, Paris, and Berlin, and the general public in each corresponding country, challenge the very legitimacy of such a trade-off and offer another way to reconcile citizenship and creed. In many such instances, the divide between European Muslims and the general public is nonexistent or not as large as originally seemed.

In light of these results, people of all backgrounds

should forsake popular assumptions and alarmist rhetoric for an evidence-based understanding of European Muslims, consequently creating a new narrative for their societies. This fresh perspective indicates that national and religious identities are not mutually exclusive, but mutually enriching, and that integration is not defined by citizen conformity, but by citizen cooperation.

Islam, Identity, and Integration

One of the most pervasive assumptions in discourse on European Muslim integration is that Muslim religiosity threatens Europe. Those who believe in the irreconcilability of Western and Muslim identity generally argue that Muslim piety, expressed in religious symbols and moral conservatism, contrasts against the backdrop of an increasingly secular and sexually liberal Europe: a recipe for increasingly insular Muslim communities and profound alienation from European national identity. These isolated communities, the argument continues, represent illiberal islands corrupting Western society's liberal values; they are "cesspools" for radicalization. Integration, or conformity with majority culture, is therefore seen as vital defense against citizens with dual loyalties.

However, a new study paints a very different picture. While Muslims in three European capitals are indeed highly religious, this piety does not lead to sympathy for terrorism,

desires to isolate, or lack of national loyalty. Not surprisingly, the study found that Muslims in London, Berlin, and Paris are much more likely than the general public in their corresponding countries to say religion is an important part of their daily lives, and to identify strongly with their faith. Predictably, the Muslims surveyed are also much more likely to express traditional moral values. In comparison to the public at large, Muslims overwhelmingly see homosexual acts, sex before marriage, and abortion as “morally wrong.”

However, religious and national identities are not mutually exclusive. Not only do urban Muslims identify strongly with their religion, but they are at least as likely as the general public to identify strongly with their countries of residence. As a British Muslim MP recently commented, “My nationality is first British and my religion is first Muslim.”

“How strongly do you identify with each of the following groups?” (Percent saying very/extremely/strongly)

	Country	Religion
Paris Muslims	46	46
French Public	46	19
London Muslims	57	69
UK Public	48	30
Berlin Muslims	35	56
German Public	36	28

Also defying conventional wisdom, high levels of Muslim religiosity and corresponding conservative moral outlooks did not translate into a sense of threat from the “sinful West” and into a desire to isolate. Instead, urban Muslims were slightly less likely to feel people with different religious practices than their own were a threat to their way of life, and slightly more likely than the general public to say they would prefer living in a mixed neighborhood. Not only do religious and national identities coexist, but it is Muslims who are the most eager to forsake isolation for integration.

Nor was a strong Muslim identity related to religious exclusivity and intolerance. In fact, Muslims in Paris and London were over 10 times more likely to express positive opinions of “fundamentalist Christians” and Catholics

than negative opinions. On the other hand, the public was essentially as likely to express positive opinions as negative opinions of Sunni Muslims, with the exception of the German public, which was almost four times as likely to express negative as positive views of Sunni Muslims. Muslims in these cities were also at least as likely to support the rights of members of other faiths to display their religious symbols as they were to render support for their own symbols, belying the popular assertion that Muslims demand preferential treatment for Islam. More accurately, Muslims’ expectations of respect for Islam and its symbols extends to an expectation of respect for religion in general. Recently, Shahid Malik, a British Muslim MP, even complained about what he called the “policy wonks” who wished to strip the public sphere of all Christian religious symbols. He explained, “Many fellow Muslims will be horrified the liberal PC brigade want Christmas canceled to avoid offending us. We actually relish this time of year.”

Muslims in Paris, Berlin, and London wish to hold on to their values, but they also choose diversity over conformity. They define integration as mutual respect and cooperation between distinct cultures, not as the dilution of minority culture into a dominant mainstream, nor as the dilution of majority culture into a politically correct muck. The West should therefore not consider Muslims a threat, given their predilection for integration within their societies.

The evidence indicates that a much more likely threat to European societies than Muslim intolerance of other faiths is the public’s fairly common negative perception of its Muslim neighbors. This danger is reflected in the gap between public perception of Muslim attitudes and the positions Muslim communities actually take. For example, while Muslims were as likely as the general public to identify strongly with their country of residence and express confidence in its democratic institutions, the majority of British, French, and German residents did not believe Muslims were loyal to their respective nations. The vast majorities of Muslims in Paris, Berlin, and London say they are respectful of other faiths. Although Muslims in each city support this claim in their expressed positive opinions of Christians, a significantly lower percentage of the public in each country agrees. What

“If you could live in any neighborhood in this country, which comes closest to describing the one you would prefer?” (Percent polled)

	Made up of a mix of people, those who share your ethnic and religious background and others who do not	Mostly made up of people who share your ethnic and religious background	Mostly made up of people who do not share your ethnic and religious background	Refused	Don’t know
Paris Muslims	78	11	3	2	6
French Public	59	31	3	1	6
London Muslims	63	25	8	1	3
UK Public	58	35	3	1	4
Berlin Muslims	71	15	13	0	1
German Public	55	34	5	2	4

divides much of the public in France, Britain, and Germany from their Muslim neighbors is not a gap in principles, but one in perceptions.

Attitudes toward fundamentalist groups (Percent polled)

	Positive	Negative
London Muslims: Fundamentalist Christian	44	3
UK Public: Sunni Muslim	26	19
Paris Muslims: Fundamentalist Christians	46	2
French Public: Sunni Muslim	13	18
Berlin Muslims: Fundamentalist Christians	28	6
German Public: Sunni Muslims	7	27

But how can one reconcile these results with other polls, such as the Pew study, that find that the majority of Muslims in Great Britain, Spain, and Germany choose Muslim identity over national identity? Is this not proof that Muslims in Europe reject the West? The evidence suggests otherwise. A primarily religious identity hardly means a crisis of integration. In predominantly Muslim countries, the Pew study also found the majority of Muslims in Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, and even Turkey consider themselves Muslims first, rather than citizens of their country. Significantly, the same poll found that Christian Americans—seldom accused of lacking national pride—were almost evenly split between those who said they were first Christian and those who said they were first US citizens. Clearly, expressing a religious primary identity does not necessarily mean rejecting one's country. The commonality among these communities is not a lack of patriotism, but a majority who considers religion important—and therefore at the heart of its identity.

Radical Rejection

But should this strong Muslim religiosity scare the West? Is this a sign of sympathy for terrorism? According to the data, the answer is no. The results from the Gallup study challenge the common dogma underpinning current discourse on radicalization and show that Muslim communities are as likely as any other to reject terrorism. In light of this evidence, the primary motivation for Muslim integration into mainstream European societies must shift from a desire to reduce security risks to a desire to promote equal citizen contribution and national unity, thus reducing suspicion and alienation of the public's Muslim neighbors.

Those who push for integration primarily as a security measure assume that communities in Europe with a disproportionate percentage of Muslims provide a sympathetic environment for terrorism, and therefore act as a "cesspool" for radicalization—an assertion unsubstantiated by evidence. Countering perceptions of religious radicalization, Muslims

in these three cities were at least as likely as the general public to condemn terrorist attacks on civilians and to find no moral justification for using violence, even for a "noble cause." This data suggests that Muslim neighborhoods are no more hospitable to terrorist cells than any other neighborhood.

"There are many acts some people may do in life. I will read out to you a number of these acts and I would like you to indicate to what extent each act can be morally justified..." (Percent polled)

	Violence for a Noble Cause Not Justified
London Muslims	81
UK Public	72
Paris Muslims	77
French Public	79
Berlin Muslims	94
German Public	75

Some sympathy for terrorist acts does exist in the Muslim world, but in a very small minority. After analyzing survey data of over 90 percent of the global Muslim population, Gallup found that despite widespread religiosity and anger at some regional Western policies, only a small percentage sympathized with the attacks of September 11.

Even more significantly, there was no correlation between level of religiosity and sympathy for terrorism. The real difference between those who condone terrorist acts and the vast majority who condemn them stems from political, rather than religious or cultural distinctions. To gain a deeper understanding of what drives public sympathy as well as public disgust for terrorism, Gallup asked both those who condoned and those who condemned extremist acts, "Why do you say that?" The responses may be surprising. For example, in Indonesia, the largest Muslim majority country in the world, not a single respondent from the small minority who condoned the attacks of September 11 cited the West's perceived moral decay or the Qur'an for justification. Instead, this group's responses were markedly secular and worldly, mostly relating to US foreign policy. For example, one Indonesian respondent said, "The US government is too controlling toward other countries, seems like colonizing." Another said, "The US has helped the Zionist country, Israel, to attack Palestine." Similarly, one of the people responsible for Europe's own September 11, the July 7, 2005 London train bombings, cited political, not cultural or religious justifications for his horrific acts.

Moreover, while residents of predominantly Muslim countries are critical of the West's perceived breakdown of traditional values, this is neither the primary driver of extremist views nor the demanded change that Muslims cite for better relations with the West. To the question of what the West can do to improve relations with the Muslim world, the most frequent responses were neither for West-

ern societies to be less democratic nor less liberal. Far from it—what Muslims said they admired most about Western societies were their democratic systems of government, and accompanying features like government transparency and freedom of speech. Instead, to improve relations, Muslims called for Western societies to change their economic and political policies toward Muslim nations, but most of all to “stop thinking of Muslims as inferior and to respect Islam.” It is not that most Muslims believe there is nothing to respect about the West, but rather that they believe the West finds nothing to respect about them. Gallup results have shown this recurrent theme in the West-Islam relationship, with the divide a result of Western misperception of Muslims rather than Muslim antagonism of the West.

In fact, instead of using religious doctrine to condone terrorism, many Muslims refer to their beliefs to condemn it. For example, to explain why she could find no moral justification for the September 11 attacks, one Indonesian woman said, “It was similar with a murder, an act forbidden in our religion.” Another said, “Killing one’s life is as sinful as killing the whole world,” paraphrasing verse 5:32 in the Qur’an. Far from reviving terrorism, the Qur’an is, for many Muslims, the inspiration for rejecting it, again challenging the perceived risk of Muslim religiosity in Europe.

Voting, Veils, Values: Rethinking Integration

Even with the fear of religious radicalization aside, Muslims and fellow non-Muslim citizens will not progress toward greater national unity until they work together to forge a new meaning for integration. This new paradigm must focus less on cultural conformity, and more on the emergence of shared goals and a commitment to democracy to leverage untapped common ground.

However, the measuring stick so far for Muslim integration has focused on symbolic rather than substantive issues, the foremost being Muslim women’s dress code. Few clothing items have enjoyed the attention or notoriety of the Muslim veil. Former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw touched off a flurry of controversy last year when he asked one of his constituents to take off her veil, which Prime Minister Tony Blair later called “a mark of separation.” Portrayed, ironically, as either a sign of docility or defiance, the veil is the subject of new legislation that allows public schools to ban the full-face cover. France already banned the headscarf from public schools several years ago, despite French and global Muslim protest.

Indeed, Muslims in London, Paris, and Berlin and the general public in each European nation surveyed are widely divided on the need to remove the veil as a condition for integration. While 61 percent of the French public defines integration as necessitating the removal of the headscarf, only 14 percent of Paris Muslims agree. Similarly, 55 percent of the British public sees the face veil as a barrier for integration, but only 13 percent of London Muslims concur. The major-

ity of the British, French, and German public believes minorities must be more flexible about their religious customs to blend in, while the majority of Muslims in each capital say it is the majority that must be more accommodating.

How do leaders move their diverse societies past this gridlock? To make any transformation, leaders must fundamentally reexamine what constitutes a healthy society. The strength of vibrant democracies comes not from citizen conformity, but from cooperation and abundance of perspectives. Leaders must therefore refocus the markers of integration away from symbols that divide to issues that unite. Exaggerated emphasis on outward conformity actually masks a great deal of common ground between Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe—ground that can be leveraged to promote greater national unity and cooperation between communities, moving Europe beyond the integration impasse.

Deemed Necessary (Percent polled)

	Removing headscarf	Removing face veil
France	61	64
Paris Muslims	14	18
Gap	47 points	46 points
Germany	43	49
Berlin Muslims	6	44
Gap	37 points	5 points
The UK	21	55
London Muslims	6	13
Gap	15 points	42 points

Integration, defined less in terms of visible conformity and more in terms of shared goals, may allow minority group members to feel more like full citizens, despite differences from the majority. Focusing away from the absence of difference as a marker for belonging, this new view may also help the majority see ethnic and religious minorities as full members of mainstream society—promoting greater national unity. Accommodating differences can actually promote greater cohesion by fostering an authentic sense of national identity for all citizens. When governments force a choice between national and religious identities, it has the opposite effect of integration. It instead denigrates people of any strongly-held faith as second class citizens. The evidence shows that individuals who are not forced to choose between their country and their creed can fully embrace both.

This phenomenon may be at play in Great Britain. The evidence suggests that the nation’s “multiculturalism” policy, which some believe promotes disloyalty among minorities, may actually promote greater national unity through diversity. Britain’s unique approach is reflected in the public’s tolerance of most religious symbols, including the Muslim headscarf. Far from being disloyal, however, London Mus-

“Many people are discussing the issue of “integration” of ethnic and religious minorities into society in this country. What does “integration” mean to you? To answer this I will ask you a series of actions and you tell me if you think it is necessary or not necessary for minorities to do these things in order to integrate into society in this country.” (Percent deemed necessary)

	Mastering National Language	Finding a job	Getting better education	Celebrating national holidays	Participating in politics	Volunteering to serve the public
Paris Muslims	95	95	83	61	68	63
French Public	91	93	86	54	54	47
London Muslims	99	95	90	60	58	67
UK Public	98	92	97	64	84	83
Berlin Muslims	89	78	84	65	67	63
German Public	79	74	82	74	66	70

lms are the most likely out of any group to identify strongly with their country. In addition, they are the most insistent on celebrating national holidays as a condition for integration and significantly more likely than Parisian Muslims to see volunteering to serve the public as necessary for full cohesion. Muslims in London are also more likely than any other surveyed population to have confidence in institutions such as the judicial system and the national government. At the same time, they are the most likely to identify strongly with their religion. Indeed, they are faithful to both Westminster and the Qur’an. Britain is a shining example of the national cohesion that can be achieved by rethinking integration.

Percent confidence in national institutions

	Elections	Judicial System	National Government	Media
London Muslims	56	48	36	34
UK Public	57	49	40	35
Paris Muslims	60	56	36	41
French Public	73	67	64	51

Moving Forward

Defining social cohesion as greater conformity results in painful compromise—the more one side gains, the more the other side must give up. Such concessions create resentment, not results. On the other hand, looking at greater cohesion in terms of greater citizen involvement naturally brings about additive benefits—the more one side gains, the more the other side also gains. Though Muslims in three European capitals and the general public in their respective countries disagree on issues of personal morality and some religious symbols, they enjoy strong agreement on mainstream issues such as employment, voting, and volunteering. This harmony signifies that religious differences do not inhibit mutual cooperation for the greater good. Concentrating on issues of agreement transforms societal

diversity from an issue of annoyance to a demonstration of tolerance.

Those who oppose multiculturalism may see it as the subversion of national identity and call for the opposite extreme. By placing national loyalty and religious fidelity in direct competition, they force Muslims to make a false choice between Islam and integration. Instead, to progress toward greater community integration, leaders must radically revise the way they think and talk about cohesion. It must be measured by examining different communities’ shared commitments to the betterment of the whole, not by judging the extent to which groups conform on a superficial plane. Cohesion must be promoted as a way to fully utilize every individual citizen’s potential, not simply as a means of reducing security risks. Strong majorities in Great Britain, France and Germany—Muslims and the wider public alike—agree that people from minority groups enrich the cultural lives of their countries. Only small minorities say people with different religious practices threaten their ways of life. Policy makers would do well to listen to the wisdom of the people. ■

All surveys were designed and funded entirely by The Gallup Organization. Surveys of Muslims in London, Paris, and Berlin were all conducted between November 2006 and February 2007. In London and Paris, probability samples were used in neighborhoods where Muslim penetration was 5 percent to 10 percent or more. All interviews in London and Paris were conducted face-to-face in respondents’ homes. In Berlin, random digit dialing was used with a sample that used first names and family names to increase the probability of reaching a Muslim household. Sample sizes were 512 in London, 502 in Paris, and 504 in Berlin. The associated maximum sampling error is ±5 percentage points for each survey. General public surveys were all conducted between December 2006 and January 2007, using random digit dialing in each country to reach representative sample of the total 15 and older adult population. Sample sizes were 1,204 in the United Kingdom, 1,220 in France, and 1,221 in Germany. The associated maximum sampling error is ±3 percentage points for each survey.