

INTRODUCTION

In its 184th monthly book, released April 2022 and titled *Pathways to Forming Religious Leaders in Europe: Imams and Female Guides in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark*, the Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center continues its exploration of European Islam. This effort began with the book *European Islam* published in April 2008, and continued with *The Resurgence of Islam in Spain* published in October 2011, *Islam and Muslims in the Balkans* published in May 2014, and *Islam in Europe: Problems of Integration* published in April 2016. The issue of the return of fighters from global hotspots was addressed in the book *Islam in France: Brotherhood, Terrorism, Treatment*, published in December 2018. The effort continued in February 2020's release: *Visions from Belgium to Combat Extremism and Terrorism*. And June 2021's study, *Islam in Sweden: the dangers of Islamism and the Challenges of Integration*, contributed to this growing body of work still further.

Academic studies on Islam in Europe tend to branch out into several disparate tracks, but most are rooted in the assumption of religion's alienation from European life. Islam is seen as a religion migrating to a new land, one whose first generation of immigrants interact with the indigenous community differently than do the second and third generations. This becomes clear in the respective generations' self-identity and degree of connection to their land of origin, as well as in conflicting modes of thought. Challenges surrounding immigrant issues have multiplied. Nowhere more so than the extent to which integration to European society and values, with its implicit abandonment of some forms of differentiating identity, is accepted.

In such a moment, a need arises for intellectual, cultural, and social negotiation. One that leads to the illusory but compelling notion that a group must be chosen to represent the "differentiated identity" being contested. And so Islamist groups emerged to fill the

vacuum as that designated representative. How such civil actors rise to the fore in environments of contested identity remains ambiguous. The mechanism by which imam, muftis, and other clerics are chosen has been subordinated to a process that rejects state intervention, and has been effectively captured by transnational organizations.

The roles of religious actors were confusing for European governments. But in truth these can be sorted into four broad categories. The first is the day-to-day muftis; they shape religious opinion on issues of daily life. The second group are the Ulama, or religious jurists who solve the intractable, emerging issues of Islamic law. The third category of spiritual guides are primarily educators and Sufis or their analogues. The fourth and final category are the guides and Imams, especially the preachers and those who lead daily prayers, rituals, and assorted rites. This fourth category, the subject matter of the study, represents the connection in which European authorities decided to put them on equal footing with clergy in the Christian context. This group has thus been endowed with a spiritual authority. Based on this assumption, programs to train Imams were initiated in prisons and hospitals, endowing their graduates with the stamp of spiritual authority.

European countries, each according to its own context, established programs for training and placing Imams in various projects. The studies of this book revolve around these projects: the Dutch academic model and its applications; the Belgian model that sought to meet social needs in prisons, hospitals, penal institutions, and even in the regular military forces.

The book addresses the training of Muslim female spiritual guides; it also discusses the management of Imams and religious guides in Belgium, as well as the Franco-Belgian efforts to establish the “European Institute for Islamic Studies” to train qualified Imams in a way that benefits from both the social and human sciences. The book also includes the Danish experience, as presented by one of the pioneers of the study of Islam in the West: Niels Valdemar-Vinding. It closely follows the State's attempt to overthrow the church as an institution, and the ramifications this

had for the Muslim community which lacks a hierarchical religious institution. The book also seeks to understand crucial ethnic distinctions. Several studies highlight the influence of state-backed Turkish Islam (Diyanet) on Turkish nationalism in the European diaspora. This is also reflected in the presence of parallel groups such as the Sulaymaniyah, which gathered around the Turkish cleric Süleyman Hilmi Tonakhan (1888 - 1959), said to have been affiliated with Saeed Al-Nourasi (1878 - 1960).

The first study in the book provides a description of European programs for training Imams, aimed at rooting them in their home countries. The study begins by examining the Dutch model that initiated the debate on Imams' training in 1982, within the framework of the Vandenberg Committee. The committee recommended the training of Imams in their (Muslim) countries of origin. Two decades later, there were attempts to expedite such work in those university-affiliated institutions that train Imams in the Netherlands, but these attempts proved fumbling, and only the impetus of terrorist attacks tied to some preachers were able to lend them a measure of political support. State intervention in the localization of training Imams was overshadowed by a fraught question: does the State have the right to train them? or will this violate the separation between religion and State? The study focuses on a number of Belgian initiatives, most notably one originating with the Catholic University of Leuven, in which the university cooperated with a "Muslim executive body". However this cooperation went into a period of abeyance before being revived again in the aftermath of the March 22 attacks in 2016.

The study also touches upon France's mixed record of training initiatives: the Institute for Studies of Islam and the Societies of the Islamic World, the 'Council of the Islamic Religion', as well as those institutes which train and license Imams. One study reviews the experiences of the Al-Ghazali Institute and the European Institute of Human Sciences, noting with concern that the so-called "Orthodox Islamic Reformation" is being studied and that the contributions of such Islamist notables as Rashid Rida, Abu Al-Alaa Al-Mawdoudi, and Hassan Al-Banna are included in the curricula.

Another study deals with the Islamist presence within training and education proposals, cataloguing their widespread influence among Fatwa-issuing institutions. It examines their role in introducing European publics to Islam and Arabic language instruction, noting Belgium and Ireland's hosting of the European Council for Research and Iftaa, as well as the British experience, which has been dominated by Islamist organizations claiming to represent the Muslim community. The French, German, and Dutch experiences are also treated extensively.

One researcher observed that a group of early centers, affiliated with the Islamists, expressed interest in translating and interpreting the books of Sayyid Qutb and Abu Al-Ala Al Mawdudi into all European languages. The researcher also referred to their role in establishing a "parallel society" and entrenching notions of "restoring the pre-Islamic era". This researcher calls for reviving the discussion about "the institutionalization of European Islam", freeing it from the Islamist's province into the remit of the wider public.

Dutch researcher and academic Wilmoet Boender begins by examining the Imams' training programs in the Netherlands and emphasizing the citizenship of Muslims. The Netherlands hosts roughly 800,000 Muslim citizens, serviced by around 500 mosques. These mosques employ Imams, half of whom are managed by the Turkish Permanent Committee for Religious Affairs, which employs and directs them. Others follow the Turkish "Milli Görüş" movement, while about fifty mosques are under the sway of the Sulaymaniyah movement. Moroccan mosques represent a substantial fraction of the total, where most attendees speak the Arabic and Tamazight languages.

The researcher notes that the State trains Protestant clergy and Catholic priests, so when an Islamic Council, affiliated with the Ministry of Integration, was established in 2004, the organization of Imams' training became official as well. The evolving needs of the Muslim community complicated the matter, however. The study interrogates the different forms of training, from the private initiatives, such as that administered by the University of

Rotterdam, to publicly funded initiatives and programs designed for the Imams trained abroad. The last of these was launched in 2018, under the title “Professional Imams in the Netherlands.” However, as the author noted, some of the academic courses “cater to a specific sectarian movement”. The study also indicates that Muslims themselves still predominantly trust clerics who received their education abroad, despite the extensive Dutch investment in domestic religious qualification.

The Belgian experience began with the demand for spiritual guides in hospitals, prisons, and penal institutions. The Belgian state's recognition of Islam as one of the country's principal religions — along with Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Anglicanism, and Orthodoxy — prompted a search for qualified "spiritual advisors". One researcher, Victoria Vandersteen, focused her study and fieldwork on those who volunteered for these positions, and discovered vast disparities in the quality and reliability of the volunteer pool.

Belgium legalized those volunteer guides by Royal Decree on October 25, 2005, for use in both prisons and hospitals. As a result, many religious issues which arose in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, involving practices such as the obligatory washing of the dead, as well as the grim subject of physician-assisted suicide. The field study covered the work of spiritual guides in juvenile detention centers and noted the small number active in nursing homes and in the military (where some 400 Muslims serve, out of a total of 25,000 soldiers).

The book includes a study on the training of female guides in Belgium, focusing on a broader role for women in countering extremism, especially after the suicide attack carried out by a Belgian woman, Muriel Degauque, in Iraq in 2005. The study notes that extremists are often self-taught. Others are indeed educated at the hands of extremist Imams, leading to calls for better regulating the profession, so as to bar the door to radicalizing elements. The study also stresses the importance of nurturing female religious scholars, in addition to others who are spiritually qualified. This reflects the

surge in demand following the pandemic's outbreak in Belgium. The researcher observed that current training processes allot only eighteen slots for female guides and preachers, as compared with 300 assigned to male Imams. She highlights the importance of supporting a "feminist trend" of Muslim women which may embolden their presence in the religious field.

The next study issues a frank call for the "institutionalization of Islam" in Belgium, and presents theories about the institution of the Mosque, over the course of various historical eras, as well as the self-training programs of its Imams. It highlights the Muslim Brotherhood's relative dominion over this field, as compared to the presence of, for example, traditional Moroccan rural Islam. The author views this in the light of the traditional imam's commitment to performing religious rites without delving into politics or social activism. The study also elaborates on the fumbling attempts to establish a solid base for training Imams in Belgium since that process's inception in 1983. It ascribes the failure, alternately, to ideological activism and overzealous government interventions. The study calls for expanding the academic space for internal critical thinking and liberating society from foreign organizational tutelage.

Michaël Privot, one of the founders of the European Institute of Islamic Studies, seeks to explain a Franco-Belgian joint project aimed at training Imams. It re-emphasized religious freedom on one hand, and called for the separation of religion and state on the other.

The author claims that Muslims are broadly agreed that states should not directly interfere in the training of religious leaders. He poses a challenge represented in the perception of certain States that dealing with Muslims revolves around the issue of "representing their religious leaders around priestly models that are already represented in the priest or the pastor of the diocese or the bishop in Christianity," and to grant a similar religious clergy role to Muslim Imams and guides!

The study dealt with the training of Imams with 'Applied Islamic Science' curricula and it stressed the need for some 'university' basis and programs that respond to the fundamental diversity of European Muslims, in terms of their geography, ethnicity, nationality, identity and sectarianism. This requires building holistic social perceptions; in a way that makes the 'Imam' a spiritual guide linking the text to the context and accepting skepticism and critical studies. The study reflects essential contributions to what it terms "the secularization of theology," meaning instruction in theology from a religiously impartial perspective, allowing it to be seen from the outside view.

The last model to be considered here is the history of Imams' education in Denmark, taken up by the eminent scholar Niels Valdemar Vinding. He offers a detailed explanation of the historical and contemporary challenges, guided by his pioneering vision of "producing the Shari'ah in the framework of the surrounding conditions". This process began with the early calls issued by the 2003 Conservative-Liberal coalition government, as part of a package of policies aimed at accelerating immigrant integration. In that context, the 56th initiative encouraged religious communities to open discussion with universities to meet the demand for providing "qualified clergy" to perform this role. As part of that effort, the Khair al-Barirah Mosque was opened in Copenhagen in 2013. At the time, the dean of the cathedral in Copenhagen, Anders Gadegaard, publicly expressed his hope for State-supported education of Danish Imams.

Within this political debate, the researcher argues that proper education of Imams is an essential safeguard against the influence of extremist Imams. In his assessment, the need for educating and employing those Imams, Vinding acknowledges the need for a new kind of education that, in addition to an Imam's foundational responsibilities, posits the need for acquiring knowledge of classical religions. The researcher concludes that the education of Imams is a process intrinsically bound up with its context, rather than being conditioned by social or religious realities.

The last study in the book dealt with the biography of Süleyman Hilmi Tonakhan (died 1959), whose movement became influential in European mosques to the extent that it competed with the tributaries of the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Millî Görüş movement. The concluding study of this issue, presented by researcher Dina Tawfic, focuses on the present-day draft law on religious discrimination in Australia.

The book raises several open questions about the European context, its uniqueness and the need to expand the concept of “al-ma’ruf” (perhaps best rendered as “virtue”) in Islam, based on the principle of accumulative human charity. It also reveals the importance of creating a new understanding of the concepts of migration and its relationship to xenophobia, violence and fear of the 'Other'. The study advises the redefinition of the 'other', in a bid to strengthen the foundations of tolerance, acceptance, and coexistence. The book also adds a question about the balance between the identity of new forms of conservatism and their impact on society. These questions point toward the need for encouraging the consolidation of the ideas of the State, citizenship, and identities rooted in place. The book notes the paucity of models for rooting and localizing the experience of ancient European Islam — that existed some centuries before the arrival of waves of modern migrations — as well as the ebbs and flows of a discourse that disrupts some of the fundamental rights of those citizens of the European Union.

In conclusion, the Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center would like to thank its colleagues and fellow researchers who participated in this book. Special thanks go to Brahim Laytouss, who coordinated the issue, and Fahad Soliman Shoqiran. The Center hopes that you will find its contents illuminating and rewarding.

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