

Europe: Hotbed of Islamophobic Extremism

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How's this for the fashion police? In late May, in a suburb of Brussels, a Muslim woman was arrested for wearing a niqab—the garment worn by a tiny proportion of Muslim women that covers all of the face but the eyes. In the subsequent melee, the woman broke an officer's nose while being frisked. Her arrest sparked clashes between Muslim youth and police in the area. A week later, the hard-right Flemish nationalist Vlaams Belang offered a 250 euro bounty to anyone reporting veiled women to the police.

The Belgian law banning the niqab, like measures across Europe ranging from outlawing the wearing of certain face veils in France to the building of more minarets in Switzerland, was ostensibly aimed at integrating Muslim minorities into Western culture.

To the extent these laws have integrated Muslims into their place in the new hierarchy of European racism—a toxic blend of traditional fascism and Western bigotry posing as secular liberalism—they've been successful. But as a tool for promoting inclusion and equality, these laws have singularly failed. Indeed, this bid to prevent the importation of "radical Islam" has been both laughable and lamentable. The Belgian woman in question was a locally born convert, as were the girls at the heart of the French head scarf law, whose father is Jewish.

The response of Europe's political class to the presence of Muslim minorities can be described most generously as a moral panic, and most accurately as a repressive legislative and rhetorical onslaught. A number of states from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean have gone to extraordinary lengths to ban what women can wear, what people can say, and where and how they can worship. Disproportionate in scale and disingenuous in conception, these laws—whatever their stated intent—were not about tackling any serious threat of Islamic extremism. Switzerland passed a referendum in 2009 outlawing the building of minarets; the country has four. In Denmark the same year, a call for a burqa ban prompted a study revealing that just three women wore it, while only 150 to 200 wore the niqab, a third of whom were Danish converts. "The burqa and the niqab do not have their place in the Danish society," insisted Danish Premier Lars Rasmussen a year later. That's true, but then they never really did.

Nor could these laws be about helping isolated communities that are culturally incapable of integration. A Gallup poll in 2009 showed that British Muslims were more likely to identify as British than British people as a whole. A Pew Research Center survey in 2006 showed that the principal concerns of Muslims in France, Germany and Spain were unemployment and Islamic extremism.

Finally, these laws couldn't be about some broader demographic "threat" that Muslims pose to the continent. A Pew study, published in January 2011, forecast the number of Muslims in Europe's population increasing from 6 percent in 2010 to 8 percent in 2030. There's a higher proportion of Asians in New Jersey than Muslims in France, the country with the highest concentration in Western Europe.

So what is really driving these laws? In no small part, they're about seeking to contain one of the most oppressed groups in Europe—one that's been radicalized by war and occupation abroad, and unemployment, poverty and poor education at home. During a period of economic crisis, this means

stepping up efforts to assimilate Muslims into a mythically unified national culture, even as they're excluded from economic advancement, political influence and social inclusion. Popular anxiety about neoliberal globalization in general and antipathy to Brussels in particular needs scapegoats. Arjun Appadurai, in his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, writes: "Minorities are the flash point for a series of uncertainties that mediate between everyday life and its fast-shifting global backdrop.... This uncertainty, exacerbated by the inability of many states to secure national economic sovereignty in the era of globalization, can translate into a lack of tolerance of any sort of collective stranger."

Contrary to the broadsides against multiculturalism—a policy few can define and that, in reality, is rarely practiced—the tendency has been to treat Muslims as though their religion defines them. Muslims are asked to account for their positions on gay rights, women's rights, Palestine or free speech in a manner that no other religious group must do. They are called to liberate "their" women in every aspect of their lives apart from what they wear—since Muslim women's wardrobes are now an affair of state. These assaults are not confined to the hard right. In the name of secular liberalism, many elements of the European left have often led the charge, as though the religion of a brown-skinned, twenty-first-century working-class minority were equivalent to the might of the eighteenth-century Catholic Church in cahoots with the monarchy.

This is not to diminish the real threat that Islamic terrorism poses on the continent, as borne out by the murder of Jewish schoolchildren in Toulouse by one Islamist earlier this year. A quarter of all terrorism-related arrests in Europe last year were of jihadists—though according to Europol, there were 174 actual acts of terrorism in the EU member states in 2011, and none of them were related to Islam. (The murder of two US military personnel in the Frankfurt airport might have fit the bill, but Germany didn't rank it as such.)

But it does put it into perspective. By far the most murderous terrorist event in Europe in recent times came at the hands of an extreme right-wing racist, Anders Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in Norway in the space of a few hours last year. Add to this the prevalence of racial assaults against Muslims, the return of fascism as a mainstream ideology in Europe, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the undeniable fact is that white, Christian Europeans pose far more of a threat to Muslims—both at home and abroad—than Muslims do to them.

Gary Younge

P.S.

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* Gary Younge, the Alfred Knobler Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the New York correspondent for the *Guardian* and the author of *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the Deep South (Mississippi)* and *Stranger in a Strange Land: Travels in the Disunited States* (New Press). He is also a contributor to *The Notion*.