

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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Introduction

Pamela Kilpadi

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Introduction

Pamela Kilpadi

What makes this volume unique is the fact that its authors have not only spent many years conducting field research investigating the issues presented, but that throughout this time they have participated actively in the democratization of their transforming societies. As representatives of a new generation of open society leaders, their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. The results are illuminating.

The authors live and work primarily in what has come to be known as Wider Europe—an area loosely referring to Europe’s eastern and southern neighbors, or perhaps all of geographical Europe beyond the borders of the recently enlarged European Union. Like the concept of Europe itself, Wider Europe lacks a commonly understood definition, not to mention a common identity.

In its articulation of EU values and the conceivable limits of the Union’s borders, the European Commission avoids drawing attention to the fact that its eastern neighbors are largely Orthodox Christian and its southern neighbors largely Muslim, not to mention the fact that the EU’s Mediterranean neighbors have served time as European colonies. The new Russia—once an imperial and later Cold War threat to Western European powers—is now an acknowledged player in EU affairs.

While such delicate diplomacy is perhaps advisable on the part of European politicians, ignorance about the political abuse of religion in the context of nation and empire building has long clouded understanding between the West and its eastern and southern neighbors. “For many Americans, for many Westerners, and for many policymakers, the experience of political Islam caught them completely off guard. Most development theories never foresaw anything like it: not only Islamic resurgence, but also what is taking place globally today—a religious resurgence manifesting itself fairly consistently across the world in terms of religion and nationalism, religion and ethnicity,” Georgetown University professor and the founding director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding John L. Esposito noted ten years ago.

“Even for many Middle East experts, the study of Islam was not seen as anything you do very seriously... In a context in which there is relative ignorance, we got a number of headline events... If you are an American policymaker and your experience with political Islam is Americans held hostage during the Iranian Revolution, the slaying of Anwar Sadat, and hijackings, if you are living behind barbed wire

embassies, how are you going to feel about this thing called Islam? What if you were there when the World Trade Center blew up? The understanding of “Islamic fundamentalism” or political Islam was mediated through headline events... The demonization of Iran in America is second only to the demonization of America in Iran.”¹

Despite increasing global awareness about the abuse of religion to justify repression, these words from 1996 eerily echo today’s reality. This would not have surprised renowned Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, whose work so eloquently demonstrated how the reproduction of prejudices and stereotypes in the western media and the academic discipline of Middle Eastern studies called “Orientalism” helped sustain Western imperial hegemony over the Middle East. The all-too-familiar western construction of Islam and the Orient from a perspective that takes Europe as the norm is also described and lamented by the contributors to this volume, especially those in Russia.

Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe attempts to illuminate the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by authors involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions.

The chapters are not arranged in any particular geographical order, but rather begin with the European Union—the current continental agenda-setter—and roughly follow a path through those regions of Wider Europe that are perhaps most characterized by interfaith and interethnic tension, through areas with relatively less tension (but perhaps as much if not more misunderstanding), and ending with some lessons from a region torn apart by multiple conflicts. In an attempt to do justice to years of evidence-gathering, extensive references are included for essays incorporating new investigatory research on controversial issues.

In the first chapter on Europe’s transforming identity, Centre for European Policy Studies fellow and former EU Ambassador to Russia Michael Emerson explores whether the EU can claim a common set of values that distinguish the Union from other global powers. The remaining two essays in this section then investigate whether the EU is succeeding in upholding these values, especially as regards the Muslim communities and migrants under its jurisdiction. It is exceedingly difficult to demand adherence to common values from non-EU neighbors aspiring to join the club when current EU members are failing to meet club criteria. As regards the treatment of its Muslims, the EU appears to be largely failing its own tests.

The second chapter on ethnic (and religious) relations in the Caucasus highlights the continued legacy and impact of Russian colonial expansion in this volatile region. A first-hand account of the Beslan primary school hostage-taking that claimed the lives

¹ Esposito, John L. “Political Islam and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, Vol. 20:2, Summer/Fall 1996, pp.119–132.

of over 300 people including nearly 200 children explains how this tragic event—in reality linked to the war in Chechnya—was incorrectly associated with a local territorial dispute, leading to the persecution of Ingush Muslims. The essay describes how Russian colonization has created stable patterns of relations between ‘reliable’ Orthodox Christian empire-builders and often ‘unreliable’ Muslim communities in the Imperial and later Soviet states. This and subsequent essays, which cover Georgia as well, emphasize that the creation of artificial borders shifting long-established interethnic power balances (such as the division of Chechnya and Ingushetia) contributed to outbreaks of violence. Dispelling myths of collective guilt and restoring a more equitable distribution of political and economic resources, therefore, will go a long way toward easing tensions among Caucasus communities.

In the third chapter, political ideology and religious tolerance in Russia is explored at a time when Russia appears to be re-exerting its ‘near abroad’ influence. The first essay asserts that the Russian Orthodox Church has somewhat paradoxically become the torch-bearer of Russia’s Communist legacy, subsuming the role of the former Communist Party in the monopolization of an often xenophobic ‘purely Russian’ popular ideology that attempts to shut out all ‘nontraditional,’ ‘alien’ religions. Apparently, as the influence on U.S. policymakers of both the ‘war on terror’ and the Christian right agenda grows, so does the convenient cooperation between Russian policymakers and Church hierarchs. Subsequent studies, including one which involved the first public discussion and cooperative initiative ever organized between journalists and Muslim leaders in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan, examine how Moscow’s political rhetoric and influence play out on the ground in Russian republics as well as the Russian-influenced secessionist entities of Georgia and Moldova.

The fourth chapter on political identity and human rights in Turkey investigates the journey taken by Turkey’s religious and political elite away from an anti-western Islamic identity toward a pro-EU secular identity striving to adopt European values and join Europe. The need to rethink and revitalize approaches to promoting human rights and civil society within Muslim societies is also addressed by the studies in this chapter, portraying a quite optimistic picture about the possibilities for positive and peaceful political and social transformation in some predominantly Muslim countries.

Islam and policy in Central Europe is the focus of the fifth chapter. Although not technically within the confines of Wider Europe, East Central Europe is nevertheless still considered by many Western Europeans as a bloc of “new” European or even Eastern neighbor countries. With the exception of largely urbanized and Europeanized Muslims from the Balkans, the majority of Central Europeans have had relatively little exposure to more traditional Muslim communities. The fear of unknown Muslim traditions and practices is common in the region, as illustrated in the essays by sometimes irrational opposition to public projects associated with Islam and Muslims, such as the construction of mosques.

The sixth and final chapter examines lessons from the post-war Balkans—a region exhausted by the political manipulation of religious and ethnic tensions which ripped the former Yugoslavia apart in a series of bloody battles in recent decades. The region’s wounds are slowly healing, with the post-war ethnically divided societies host to multiple

international experiments in the promotion of tolerance. A key lesson that runs through many of the essays harkens back to findings from the Caucasus, which show that more equitable political representation among ethnicities as well as distribution of economic resources will pave the road toward lasting peace.

The authors of this volume are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while at the same time developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ often remain virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in 1998, some 250 of its most active alumni and current fellows have grown into a working network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Now nurtured by a variety of local and international donors as well as Soros programs and foundations, the new network of open society policy researchers has grown in influence, with alumni fellows launching their own research institutes and national policy fellowships. According to the results of a recently completed multi-year impact evaluation by the Global Development Network’s Bridging Research and Policy Project (available at www.gdnet.org), by contributing new, locally interpreted and “owned” knowledge to the “knowledge value collective,” the International Policy Fellows encourage reforms within their country and organizational contexts, which is beneficial to their societies as well as their own performance as researchers.

In their search for new knowledge, fellows have demonstrated that the more we strive to view the world from other perspectives, the more we succeed in finding solutions to common problems. The lesson for good governance is that the more states open their policymaking processes to critical and minority opinions, the better their chances of ensuring the security and prosperity of their societies.

Nevertheless, open society has its enemies. Following a brief period of post-Cold War openness, Russian and other former Soviet and Eastern European officials have begun cracking down on civil society. At times bolstered by an increase in oil prices and a decline in western moral authority following the war in Iraq, authoritarian leaders around the world are flexing their muscles, and even winning approval on occasion via the ballot box.

As a consequence, in addition to thanking those listed in this volume for both their editorial and intellectual insights, I wish to extend special thanks to those colleagues who cannot be named in these pages.

Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.