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BY RAMZY BAROUD
26.07.2021

Progress or War: On Islamophobia and Europe's Demographic Shifts

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Europe's identity crisis is not confined to the ceaseless squabbles by Europeans over the EU, Brexit or football. It goes much deeper, reaching sensitive and dangerous territory, including that of culture and religion. Once more, Muslims stand at the heart of the continent's identity debate.

Of course, anti-Muslim sentiments are rarely framed to appear anti-Muslim. While Europe's right-wing parties remain committed to the ridiculous notion that Muslims, immigrants and refugees pose a threat to Europe's overall security and unique secular identities, the left is not entirely immune from such chauvinistic notions.

The right's political discourse is familiar and is often condemned for its repugnantly ultra-nationalistic, if not outright racist, tone and rhetoric. The left, on the other hand, is a different story. The European left, notably in countries like France and Belgium, frame their 'problem' with Islam as fundamental to their supposed dedication to the secular values of the State.

"A problem arises when, in the name of religion, some want to separate themselves from the Republic and therefore not respect its laws," Macron said during a speech in October 2020.

Leftist politicians and intellectuals were just as eager as the right to prevent Ihsane Haouach, a Belgian government representative, from serving as a commissioner at the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men (IEFH). Again, both sides joined forces, although without an official declaration of unity, to ensure Haouach had no place in the country's democratic process.

It was a repeat of a similar scenario in France last May when Sara Zemmahi was removed from the ruling party's candidates list for seemingly violating France's *valeurs de la République* – the values of the Republic.

These are but mere examples, and are hardly restricted to French-speaking countries. There are many such disquieting events pointing to a deep-seated problem that remains unresolved. In Britain, Rakhia Ismail, who was celebrated as the country's first hijab-wearing mayor in May 2019, resigned from her post less than a year and a half later, citing racism and marginalization.

While the Belgian, French, and British media elaborated on these stories as if unique to each specific country, in truth, they are all related. Indeed, they are all the outcome of an overriding phenomenon of anti-Muslim prejudice, coupled with a wave of racism that has plagued Europe for many years, especially in the last decade.

Though Europe's official institutions, mainstream media, sports clubs and so on, continue to pay lip service to the need for diversity and inclusion, the reality on the ground is entirely different. A recent example was the horrific outcome of England's defeat in the EURO2020 final against Italy. Gangs of white English, mostly males, attacked people of color, especially black people, whether on the street or online. The extent of cyber-bullying, in particular, targeting dark-skinned athletes is almost unprecedented in the country's recent history.

Various British officials, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson, condemned the widespread racism. Interestingly, many of these officials have said or done very little to

combat anti-Muslim hate and violence in the past, which often targeted Muslim women for their head or face covering.

Strikingly, Johnson, purportedly now leading the anti-racist charge, was one of the most disparaging officials who spoke demeaningly of Muslim women in the past. "Muslim women wearing burka look like letter boxes," he said, according to the BBC.

Of course, Islamophobia must be seen within the larger context of the toxic anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiments, now defining factors in shaping modern European politics. It is this hate and racism that served as the fuel for rising political parties like Le Front National in France, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, The Freedom Party in Austria and the Lega in Italy. In fact, there is a whole intellectual discourse, complete with brand new theories that are used to channel yet more hate, violence and racism against immigrants.

And where is the left in all of this? With a few exceptions, much of the left is still trapped in its own intellectual hubris, adding yet more fuel to the fire while veiling their criticism of Islam as if genuine concern for secularism.

Oddly, in Europe, as in much of the West, crosses and Stars of David as necklaces, or the Catholic nuns' head covering, *velo delle suore*, let alone the kippahs, the religious tattoos and many other such symbols are all part of Europe's everyday culture. Why do we never hear of such controversy of a Jewish man being tossed out of a public building because of his kippah or a white French woman being expelled from university for wearing a cross? The matter has less to do with religious symbols, in general, than of the religious symbols of races and peoples who are simply unwanted in Europe.

Also, limiting the discussion to refugees and immigrants may give the impression that the debate is mostly concerned with the non-European 'others' who are 'invading' Europe's shores, determined to 'replace' Europe's original, white, Christian inhabitants. This is hardly the case, since a sizable percentage of Belgians and French, for example, are themselves Muslims, estimated at 6 percent and 5% respectively. Namely, these Muslims are European citizens.

Haouach, Zemmahi and Ismail actually wanted to be a part of – not break apart from – these societies by honoring their country's most cherished political traditions, yet without erasing their own cultural heritage and religious identities in the process. Alas, they were all vehemently rejected, as if Europe has made a collective decision to ensure that Muslims subsist in the margins forever. And when Muslim communities try to fight back, using Europe's own judicial systems as their supposed saviors, they are, once again, rejected. The latest of such spurns was in June, when Belgium's constitutional

court resolved that prohibiting the wearing of hijab does not constitute a violation of freedom of religion or the right to education.

It is time for European countries to understand that their demographics are fundamentally changing, and that such change can, in fact, be beneficial to the health of these nations. Without true diversity and meaningful inclusion, there can be no real progress in any society, anywhere.

But while demographic shifts can offer an opportunity for growth, it can also inspire fear, racism and, predictably, violence as well.

Europe, which has fought two horrendous wars in the last century, should know better.

Ramzy Baroud is a journalist and the Editor of The Palestine Chronicle. He is the author of five books. His latest is "These Chains Will Be Broken: Palestinian Stories of Struggle and Defiance in Israeli Prisons" (Clarity Press, Atlanta). Dr. Baroud is a Non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA), Istanbul Zaim University (IZU). His website is www.ramzybaroud.net

CounterPunch 24.07.2021