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EUROPEAN NON-TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY NETWORK

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Cultural autonomy, Islamic minority schools and their prospects as forms of non-territorial autonomy in western Europe

📄 Summary

Within the frame of the management of increasing cultural and religious diversity in Europe, concerns around minority religious schools are commonly identified within policies related to integration, social cohesion, citizenship and rights to religious freedom and education. In the present policy paper, the main question is whether the creation (and proliferation) of such minority religious schools and religious education related to the Muslim faith represents an effort of socio-cultural preservation and reproduction of religious values that can be classified as a form of non-territorial autonomy (NTA), conducive to the integration of the minority group and the development of societal group coexistence within diversity. To illustrate the issue, the brief examples of Belgium, Germany and the UK offer a short and concise overview of how the question of Islamic schools is treated in each context.

Recommendations

▸ Differentiate within state policies and political discourse between the cultural and religious needs of Muslims in education.

▸ Enhance research towards a more nuanced understanding of whether Islamic schools meet their academic, social and economic goals and foster integration compared to 'mainstream' non-religious public schools.

▸ Test from a diversity management perspective the degree to which marginalisation of Muslim minorities in western European societies is at the root of the corporatisation of religious minority organisations in the field of religious education.

▸ Refine and redirect the role of the state in managing religious pluralities and responding to the needs of its communities on the basis of critical partnerships with non-state actors, not resistance or abstention from them.

Introduction

Within the frame of the management of increasing cultural and religious diversity in Europe, concerns around minority religious schools[1] are commonly identified within policies related to integration, social cohesion, citizenship and the rights to religious freedom and education. Less often, accounts of such schools (in particular those related to minority faiths such as Islam) are considered from the perspective of cultural autonomy and agency or even as mobilisation efforts of the groups concerned with their establishment.

At the outset, such schools are products of political struggles and trajectories that, in the European context, have historically concerned mostly majority faith groups (Maussen & Bader, 2014, p. 12). Today, the emergence of new patterns of social inequality, linked to cultural, religious and ethnic identities entering Europe through immigration, together with the politicisation of religion, seem to affect the pace of creation and development of such schools though from a minority perspective. Yet, despite growing social and political resistance, religious schools connected to immigrant populations, such as Islamic schools that are the focus of the present analysis, continue to grow across Europe under strict state supervision within a number of countries.

Seen through the lens of non-territorial autonomy (NTA), however, the picture of this trend begs for more nuance. The growth of the 'market share' of such schools needs to be approached by considering several factors: that of the higher demand for them, the creation of institutional opportunities for their establishment and the observation of attempts to balance power within these schools per se, around them (e.g. with national authorities, parents, teachers) and in connection with wider society (e.g. due to their minority religious status) (Maussen & Bader, 2014, p. 4). The role of the state in each case remains crucial and often determines the pace of their development.

As the number of Islamic schools grows, the number of Muslims learners who attend them in western European (and other) countries is predictably increasing as well (Shakeel, 2018, p. 392).[2] The increase is due to the cultural and religious demands of Muslim communities and parental dissatisfaction with secular public school systems that are perceived as an 'alien social environment' for Muslim learners. School choice, in this respect, is prima facie influenced by three main sets of factors, namely the purpose of Islamic schooling, parental wishes and the academic value and quality of these schools (Shakeel, 2018, p. 3).

In this light, the main question in the present policy paper is the extent to which the creation (and proliferation) of such minority religious schools and the religious education related to the Muslim faith more broadly represents an effort of socio-cultural preservation and re-

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[1] Religious or faith schools encompass all schools that adopt a distinctive religious character in their operation (e.g. curriculum, admission policies, appointment of teaching staff, internal regulations, etc.) (Maussen & Bader, 2014, p. 3).

[2] The distinction in terminology between 'Islamic' and 'Muslim' schools is often made in order to show how the former has a strong religious connotation while the latter as more cultural one (Shakeel, 2018).

production of religious values that can be classified as a form of NTA, conducive to the integration of the minority group and the development of societal group coexistence within diversity.

The context of Islamic schools in the West

Islamic schools in western Europe are not uniform: some adopt conservative religious approaches to education while others embrace a more liberal stance. This is largely because, for a considerable proportion of Muslims in the West, a strong religious identity (e.g. through regular mosque attendance) is not a given (Smith, 2000) although their Islamic identity is rarely rejected altogether (Merry & Driessen, 2005, p. 412). Due to their diasporic positionality, individual Muslim learners in classrooms are interdependent and rely on various networks of social solidarity when it comes to their religious identity within a multicultural social setting (Martin, 2014, p. 3). For these new nomads, religion is of social, political and legal significance. Minority status of a religious and ethnic group in diaspora, such as for the ones of interest in this analysis, tends often to reinforce cultural identification.[3] Diasporic religion breaks the limits of territoriality while creating new types of transnational religious communities, thus developing the tendency to strengthen the link between religion and ethnicity (Martin, 2014, p. 92). This process is precisely at the source of the creation of religious schools in many cases in western states.

Due to the decentralised nature of the Islamic faith in Europe, religious schools are also not homogenous with respect to their educational purpose(s). The social and economic needs of their learners, the quest for academic excellence as well as the protection of learners against discrimination shape their curricula and overall operation (Shah, 2012). Just as crucially, the politicisation of minority religion in public education follows the tradition of the (not so) new type of agency that religious organisations have been embracing in education across time and space: religious bodies act as agents of change and modification through education by way of competition and/or cooperation with the state as the 'legitimate' provider of education.[4] These actors play a powerful social and economic role, particularly for minorities whose interests and rights may not be well protected and/or understood by the mainstream society and the state, through the creation of culture, public morality and of economic activity through providing jobs, and, as such, become able to influence the gravitas of non-discrimination laws and equality (Evans & Gaze, 2008, p. 45). In some instances, minority religious actors are even able to build an entire (alternative) social environment that includes not only schools but also banks, hospitals and other services to cater for the needs of their believers/community members. Thus, they become 'systems of power' in their own right (Martin, 2014, p. 142).

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3   Martin (2014) at p. 91 using the examples of Jews, Muslims in Europe and Chinese in South East Asia.

4   This role is parallel to that of churches as NGOs (e.g. in Africa). See Martin (2014) at p. 107 and pp. 112–113.

However, regardless of the specific national or faith context, the diverse types of minority religious schools carry a dual connection: one to the religious community to which they belong and serve and one towards a wider system of (national) education. Depending on their degree and type of affiliation with the community in question, oversight from religious authorities varies. The type of teachers and learners, along with the type of school governance and the values content of education, will be affected by this side of the connection. At the same time, as part of a broader education system, these schools are also expected to subscribe to regulations, principles and values that govern the state system, especially to the extent that they are supported financially by the state. Constraints on staff qualifications, curriculum, educational and professional standards or equal opportunities are linked to this other side of the connection (Sullivan, 2009, pp. 938–939).

Within such dynamic processes, the role and support of the state can vary when responding to Muslim minorities' claims to religious education: in some European countries, religious education can be funded either through grants or within the structure of the public education system itself. In other contexts, Islamic schools can be privately funded, publicly funded and privately operated and even publicly funded and publicly operated.[5] Additional methods to obtain such education outside state-support frameworks include privately run extra-curricular Islamic classes and/or homeschooling.

Depending on a country's approach to publicly funded religious education, as well as its political approach to inclusion and social cohesion issues, several models are practised in the European context. According to Berglund (2015, p. 8), the following four main approaches to the organisation of Islamic religious minority education can be broadly conceived:

▸ A framework of cooperation between the state and religious institutions (e.g. as in Austria, Germany or Spain): religions officially recognised by the state allow recognised Islamic associations to provide religious education within the school system.

▸ In cases of the presence of 'pillarised', parallel dominant religions (e.g. as in the Netherlands or Finland), Muslims can benefit from parallel systems of institutionalisation to create a parallel path for Islamic religious education.

▸ In contexts of one dominant state religion, some states (e.g. the UK or Sweden) provide state funding for minority religious schools (including Islamic ones) subject to these schools following national curricula. This possibility is normatively premised on the principle of equal rights and opportunities afforded to majority–minority religions.

▸ Finally, in cases of clear separation between church and state (e.g. as in France) the institutionalisation of Islamic education depends entirely and exclusively on Muslim community initiatives.

In line with this typology, three brief examples are discussed below to illustrate the first three variations in creating Islamic schools in western Europe. They showcase variable degrees

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5   Teacher training programme at university level for Islamic religious instruction exist in some instances as well (e.g. in Germany such programmes can be found in Muenster-Osnabruck, Frankfurt, Tuebingen and Nuremberg- Erlangen (Berglund, 2015)). The cases of the US and France are explicit insofar as religious and more particularly Muslim schooling is exclusively private-initiative based.

of state involvement and models for support for such initiatives, and provide the explicit socio-legal background against which they can be considered as NTA-premised efforts. As the fourth category implies no state support and/or involvement, it is not represented among the examples discussed. The examples chosen are those of Germany, Belgium and the UK respectively.

Cooperation between state and religious institutions: Germany

Muslim groups migrated to Germany in the 1960s and 1970s for labour-related reasons, as 'guest workers'. Currently, the Muslim population amounts to over 5 million (approximately 6 per cent of the total population). Two thirds of Muslims in Germany have Turkish origins. In terms of state recognition, there is no nationwide Muslim organisation that has achieved the status of an official religious community, in part due to the self-conception of the groups concerned as 'guest workers' who would return to their home country at some future point (Berglund, 2015, p. 16). Such a perspective is, however, currently in decline.

In relation to Islamic religious education, the underlying rationale among parents is on one hand satisfaction about the opportunity to learn about Islam in the public school system but on the other hand concern about the extent to which the German state is promoting a 'German' type of Islam through these programmes (Yasar, 2013, p. 137). In general, private Islamic schools can be opened in Germany, in accordance with the Constitution, but the majority of children attend public schools.[6] Private schools are acknowledged by state authorities and in most cases can receive state funding. Many such schools are run by (majority) religious organisations and have been growing in numbers in the last few decades (Miera, 2008, pp. 3–4).[7]

Overall, however, very few private Islamic schools exist in Germany due in part to the comparatively weaker presence of private schooling in general (Fuess, 2007) but also due to societal and political resistance. Some private schools for students of Turkish background are nevertheless available (e.g. in Berlin, Cologne, Hannover or Stuttgart), established by educational associations of Turkish migrants and their descendants. While officially not offering Islamic religious instruction, these schools are occasionally framed as pursuing Islamic fundamentalist approaches (Miera, 2008, p. 11). Even within the public education system, the lack of existence of an overarching national Islamic organisation recognised by the state is invoked to justify the limited support toward Islamic education.

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6   The exception of Berlin where a kind of free and private Islamic education is available confirms the general rule. Similarly, in Hamburg, a religious education model for all, with the participation of 80 per cent of Islamic association bodies, is available in public schools.

7   According to DeStatis (2018), 9 per cent of all German students attended private schools in 2016, a large proportion of which are run by the Protestant Church.

Historical parallel presence of religions: Belgium

Muslim communities are treated by the Belgian state as one single community despite their diverse origins, religious practices and cultural backgrounds.[8] Largely the result of labour migration from Turkey and Morocco in the 1960s–1970s and ensuing family reunification processes in the 1980s–1990s, the Muslim minority has been confronted for many years with the lack of a 'representative' body, which is required in order to benefit from state recognition.

In accordance with Article 24, para. 1 of the Belgian Constitution, the state funds both governmental schools as well as schools established by 'private' groups or organisations. At present, there are four recognised and state-supported Islamic schools in the region of Brussels, supported by the French community, with a fifth under preparation and a further one planned in Wallonia (Charleroi). The first such school opened in 1989, but the process of creating additional Islamic schools was reinvigorated only recently, in 2016, with the opening of a second school. The regular curriculum is taught in these schools. In the Flemish part of Belgium, similar attempts to establish Islamic schools have so far been largely unsuccessful with the exception of the 'Lucerna colleges', managed by the Turkish Gulen movement, which do not have the official status of Islamic schools but instead are considered non-denominational public schools (Franken & Sägesser, 2021). Interestingly, around 50 per cent of Muslim students attend private Catholic schools where they have to take part in Catholic Religious Education classes.

The Belgian case is unique insofar as it is an isolated case within Europe with regards to provision of Islamic instruction in mainstream state schools, which a priori would suggest no further need for separate Islamic schools. In fact, 40 per cent of Muslim learners attend Islamic instruction in state schools (Shakeel, 2018, p. 11). However, Muslim parents feel that public school curricula on Islam lack substantive content, promote moral permissiveness and are characterised by lower academic achievements. These concerns have been transformed into calls for more Islamic schools (e.g. see the work of the Arab European League) (Merry & Driessen, 2005, p. 415). These calls have had limited success because of strong political opposition to the idea and due to limited agency of parents in setting up new schools.

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8   In Belgium, their number is estimated at 7.6 per cent of the total population or 782,000 (Pew Research Center, 2017).

One dominant religion but equal opportunities: UK

Within the last 25 years, the face of religion and religiosity in the UK has changed considerably: traditional forms of religious authority and practice have given way to less uniformity and an increasingly diverse span of religious and non-religious commitments (Clarke & Woodhead, 2015, p. 6). At the same time, religion- and belief-based organisations have been called upon to develop a network of social services, in response to austerity and cuts in public services (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015, p. 64). Their sustained social action, often through innovative models, indicates their growing role within the public space. This role is conditioned by a complicated relationship of mutual criticism between the state and its agencies. As has been the case historically in education, religious and faith communities in the UK are now claiming a partnership with the state in the provision of educational services.

Independent Muslim schools emerged from the 1950s onwards, and their growth has accelerated since the 1990s. Since 2001, their growth has been supported further through the government's support of the Association of Muslim Schools. For Muslim Independent Schools, educating an estimated 5 per cent of the 500,000 Muslim children in UK schools, there is a choice to be made in terms of the content of education: they either follow the national curriculum, using the existing textbooks, or, if more conservative, eliminate aspects of the curriculum considered un-Islamic, such as music, dance or arts. What these schools share is an educational approach relying on Islamic instruction, dress codes and communal prayers as well as observance of the Islamic calendar.

The academic value of faith schools is another issue for disagreement: 'faith schools' are consistently favoured by UK governments as symbols of choice and diversity in the education system. From the perspective of the state, their high academic and market demand among parents is justified more because they are attended by pupils from families that have different preferences and attitudes towards education rather than because of their educational programme and methods.

From the perspective of religious minority communities, the main motivating factors to establish 'faith schools' are the desire to introduce faith-based principles within minority learners' education in order to support their intellectual and moral development in harmony with their faith (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004, p. 8).[9] Preferences for single-sex schooling, the lack of specialist training in religious sciences (Meer & Breen, 2018, p. 89) (e.g. non-British imams are not always in tune with life in the UK) and teaching materials that rely on ethnocentric principles for religious education are common in 'faith schools', and, because of this, they are perceived as institutions antithetical to 'common' values.

For religious minority learners, their families and communities, the function of 'faith schools' responds to other parallel societal processes: as spaces sheltering students from religious

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[9]   The aims of Muslim 'faith schools' in Britain have been for example described as serving 'the goal of living up to standards of Islam, rather than implying its achievement.'

discrimination, as institutions 'supplying' these communities with role models, as opportunities to reverse the climate of low expectations from teachers and, ultimately, as places where hyphenated identities take concrete shape and evolve (Meer & Breen, 2018, p. 91). These 'community-based' schools (Meer & Breen, 2018, p. 92) are nevertheless struggling to address in consistent terms the question of how to strike a balance between producing active citizens and producing active members of their respective cultural communities.

Policy implications: autonomous religious education as a public good?

The brief foregoing account of the cases in Germany, Belgium and the UK highlights three common trajectories. Firstly, the crucial role of state support in establishing and developing Islamic schools in Europe (whether or not through public recognition schemes); without state support, these schools struggle to develop and achieve the standards required by national curricula. Secondly, attempts to establish Islamic education within or alongside public education systems are highly correlated to political climate and public opinion. Prevailing resistance against them may lead to irreversible condemnation of any such effort (with implications for social cohesion). Thirdly, despite considerable inhibiting factors, the demand for Islamic education continues to grow. In fact, there is a noticeable paradox when it comes to minority religious schools in Europe: the demand for such schools seems to increase, with few exceptions (e.g. France), despite a broad secularising trend dominating the continent during the last decades (Merry, 2014, p. 1).

Empirical literature emphasises parental motives or the institutional features of such schools as explanation for their growth but has neglected .the justification of institutionalised racism as a core mechanism conducive to the continuous creation of minority religious schools (Merry, 2014, p. 2). These schools, when serving vulnerable minorities in particular, embrace indirectly the purpose of creating culturally autonomous 'safe spaces' and facilitating the exercise of group self-determination. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that education corresponds to a policy area that has been 'devolved' closer to the local level. This means that there is greater space available for school autonomy and parental choice to increase in parallel.

Criticism levelled against minority religious schools tends to focus on their public financing, their educational practices and/or their pedagogical autonomy, but mostly highlights their nature as institutions likely to undermine the capacity for autonomous decision-making of their learners due to indoctrination and extremist tendencies (Merry, 2014, p. 4). Minority religious schools are, however, places where social networks and membership acquire meaning, often to the point of 'turning segregation to [an] advantage' (Merry, 2014, p. 15) especially when minority religious groups experience greater equality of recognition and self-respect, compared to mixed environments. In such case, minority religious schools can indeed become spaces where members 'resist, rearrange and reclaim' and operate within a pragmatic strategy towards voluntary association.

The challenge of providing quality Islamic education for Muslim children as minorities is considerable. Outcomes are diverse, as mentioned, and largely depend on endogenous factors (e.g. educational policies in specific countries, legislation, political considerations, integration policies and state–religion arrangements) as well as exogenous ones (e.g. mobilisation and self-organisation of minorities). The question then becomes how the law, the school system and the religious organisations involved take this kind of diversity into account. As importantly, it becomes an issue of devising policy and law that understand the pluralising effects of globalisation and multiple/plural identities.

Moving forward, in diversity governance terms, minority Islamic schools in western Europe will remain relevant due to the constant growth of the Muslim population,[10] when compared to the overall world population, with projections expecting Islam to become the largest religious group by 2050 (Lipka & Hackett, 2017). In addition, it is expected that Muslim parents and their communities will maintain the wish to educate their children in accordance with Islamic values and practices, as well as the desire for them to obtain high academic achievements in some cases. In a noticeable way, Muslim parents and their communities create and opt for Islamic schools in order to shield their children from Islamophobia and discrimination that may be encountered within public schools.

Against the growing unease surrounding political Islam, the need for Islamic schools promoting positive Islamic identities can be expected to continue to rise. To respond to the integration concerns, there is evidence from the US context that Islamic schools are able to produce social networks that support integration into the broader civil society (Cristillo, 2009). Returning to Europe, resistance to their creation often implies the further spreading of systemic discrimination against Muslim minority groups. As such, the establishment of such schools can be perceived as an effort of Muslim diasporic communities to become culturally autonomous, especially when a right to denominational education is constitutionally guaranteed.

To summarise, according to Ozgur (2005), the main challenges for Islamic minority schools in western Europe going forward are:

▶ Enhancing the public perception about the need for Islamic schools.

▶ Keeping the mission of such schools alive in material- and content-related terms.

▶ Addressing recurring leadership issues within those institutions.

▶ Attracting, training and retaining qualified staff.

▶ Responding to diverse parent/learner bodies that have different priorities and expectations from such schools.

▶ Building bridges, partnerships and networking between minority religious schools and majority communities, the state and other minority communities.

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10   See for example the registered growth of Islamic education in the UK, with a growth rate of up to 75 per cent in 10 years (Abrams, 2011).

It should nevertheless be stressed that, in the context of bottom-up movements towards the creation of Islamic schools in western Europe, the state continues to play an important role, especially when regulating the activities of public religions. The level of competition and conflict among such public religions precisely pushes the state to forge partnerships and co-operate with them.[11] For education, this means that faith organisations are encouraged to position themselves as 'agents or mediators of government policies' (Beckford, 2010, p. 129). In these scenarios, the state can opt for selective and strategic partnerships that are usually labelled as community cohesion initiatives. This explains legal and policy choices within public education in many instances, as well as the strictly regulated legal framework of such schools.

The risks with this approach to religious diversity management remain that competition among religious groups for resources may become fierce and produce additional conflicts among them (Beckford, 2010, p. 131), in addition to the fact that faith groups may, in some cases, maintain ethnic and religious divisions against the more vulnerable segments within them (Beckford, 2010, p. 131). In that sense, the path of the clear separation of states from religion remains questionable. Modernity, therefore, perhaps lies in accepting that states have a role to play in shaping public religions, not abstaining from them (Beckford, 2010, p. 133).

In conclusion, the marginalisation of Muslim minorities across Europe has indirectly reinforced the processes of the corporatisation of religious organisations (Anwaruddin & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2015, p. 150). This is mostly visible in the gradual growth of Muslim 'faith schools' across the continent as an indication of how religious actors are striving towards autonomy in the provision of services towards their members. It remains to be seen whether the exercise of such autonomy is in tune with the state's understanding of social cohesion.

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11 The trend is particularly obvious in public education in the UK, with a long-standing cooperation of the state with faith organizations (e.g. New Labour's ,faith sector' policy).

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