New Muslim Youth Associations in Spain

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Ever since the legal recognition of Islam in Spain Muslim associations have been increasing in number. The March 11 bombing attacks of 2004 brought to the fore a new group consisting largely of young Muslims born in Spain who are engaged in social participation through the creation of social and cultural associations.

In the rise of Muslim associations in Spain four events have been crucial.[1] First, the legal enactment of freedom of religion in 1967 coincided with the appearance of Muslim associations mainly founded by the Muslim population from Ceuta and Melilla and students coming from Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine. In 1970 and 1971 the Jamaat Ahmadia of Islam in Spain and the Muslim Association in Spain were registered in the Muslim Communities Register. Following this, in 1979, Spanish converts to Islam created the Muslim Community of Spain.

The second event was the recognition in 1989 of Islam as a deeply rooted and clearly established religion in Spain because of its evident integration into Spanish society. The current structure of the Comisión Islámica de España (CIE) – an umbrella organization representing Muslims – was created with the formation of the Spanish Federation of Islamic Religious Entities (FEERI) and the Spanish Islamic Communities Union (UCIDE). Ever since, Muslim associations have had to register within one of these federations.

Thirdly, the signing of the Cooperation Agreement between the Spanish State and the Spanish Islamic Committee in 1992 enabled Muslims to practice their faith, at least in theory. The fourth event was the increase in numbers of Muslim migrants, since the early 1970s, and the settlement of their families mainly in the 1990s, thanks to the 1985 Immigration Law.[2]

During these years, the majority of Muslims registered their associations in registers for minority religious groups with a few registered as social and cultural groups. In general, associations were created on the basis of origin (Spanish converts to Islam or migrants) and their status in Spain (workers or students). Three different groups represented the members of Muslim associations: Muslim migrants settled before the Spanish current democracy, Spanish converts to Islam, and different migrant groups arriving in the 1980s and 1990s.[3]

This changed after the March 11 train bombings when the offspring of migrants, young Spanish converts, and young migrants living in Madrid decided to create new organizations and to revitalize others. While old Muslim associations used religious registers, these new associations appeared in social and cultural ones, outside the two Muslim federations. Their members do not speak as migrants but as natives who simply practice another religion. Also they prefer to participate in society as young Muslims regardless of where they were born, what their family origin or their social status is; and ask that their participation not be limited to religious activities.

They are mostly between twenty and thirty five years old, male and female, highly educated and interested in reflecting on the meaning of being a Muslim and ways to express that meaning to non-Muslims. While in the past Muslim associations worked to achieve the institutionalization of Islam in Spain, these new associations take advantage of that legal recognition in order to show who they are. This concern determines their activities, as well as points to a new social situation. On the one hand it shows the increase of Spanish Muslims in society and their effort to combine Islamic belief with Spanish nationality. On the other hand, it shows a global tendency among Muslims living in non-Muslim countries to distinguish between "good" (peaceful) and "bad" (terrorist) Muslims. This is related to the wish to be accepted as good citizens, irrespective of their beliefs, and to be recognized as integrated people able to manage between civil rights and religious belief. To this end they organize seminars and meetings. Apart from reflecting on the concept of Muslim identity, they develop common social projects and show what Islam means through their deeds.

Two such organizations are Tayba and Jóvenes Musulmanes de Madrid, both in Madrid. Both have the same goal, i.e. to show non-Muslims that they do not support violence and terrorism in the name of their religion, but choose peaceful and tolerant methods to promote their beliefs. Tayba started as a group of *da'wa* addressing both the Muslim and non-Muslim population of Madrid. They aimed at deepening their own knowledge of Islam by organizing meetings and seminars, and through reading the Quran and hadith. They also collaborated in social projects such as visiting and helping sick people, and collecting money for their treatment. While these actions were directed at Muslims, they wanted to do something positive to non-Muslims as well. Therefore they promoted a blood donation campaign and engaged in a social voluntary programme to collaborate with non-religious NGOs.

Members of Jóvenes Musulmanes de Madrid, on the other hand, are more interested in addressing broader issues related to the social position of Muslims in Spanish society. This was mainly achieved by arranging debate meetings rather than by offering social services. In these meetings they would discuss topics such as the clash of civilizations, Orientalism, unemployment among Muslims, stereotypes, marriage, and so on. Although these two organizations thus focus on two different kinds of activities, they both aim to be recognized as embodying good Muslims.

The search for the meaning of being a Muslim started after 9/11 among some Muslims in Spain, but became urgent after the attacks of 11 March 2004. Muslims in Madrid went through that event as Madridiens, but at the same time were confused when the train bombings were connected with terrorists who claimed their acts in the name of Islam. That claim motivated Spanish Muslims to know more about their religion, especially young Muslims who, for the first time, organized themselves outside the existing Muslim federations, taking an active social and political role after that unforeseen event. But this also reflects the global desire of Muslim groups all over the world to change the stereotypes non-Muslims have about them. This is another important feature of the new Muslim associations: they are part of and participate in global debates, which shape their concerns, activities, and goals. The new associations are still few, but their participation, as we have seen, means a change in Spanish Muslim associational life.

Notes

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2. Iván Jiménez-Aybar, *El Islam en España. Aspectos institucionales de su estatuto jurídico* (Pamplona: Navarra Gráfica Ediciones, 2004); Elena Arigita Maza, "Representing Islam in Spain: Muslim Identities and the Contestation of Leaderships," *Muslim World* 96 (October 2006): 563–84.
3. Jordi Moreras, "Musulmanes en España. Más allá de la memoria histórica: la viva presencia musulmana en España," 1999, at http://allserv.rug.ac.be/hdeley/moreras2.htm.

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