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Muslim Organizations in Poland

DOBROŚŁAWA WIKTOR-MACH

In November 2006, the Muslim League of Poland co-organized a conference entitled "Integrating Muslims in Central-Eastern Europe." The aim was to broadcast positive examples of social and cultural integration by Muslims, and to promote the concept of *Wasatiyya* (from Ar. *wasat*, middle), or what has become known as "Islamic Centrism." Forged in response to interactions between Muslim countries and the West, the proponents of *Wasatiyya* seek to construct a positive European-Muslim identity. In so doing, they reconsider the relevance and application of Sharia to modern Muslim environments.¹

Though Muslims from Russia, Arab countries, and Iran first arrived in Poland in the nineteenth century and subsequent waves of Arab, Iranian, and Afghani Muslims blended into Polish society during the 1970's and 80's, the country's Muslim population only started to increase significantly from 1989, when the Soviet Union began to lose its grip on the surrounding provinces. While there is no official data, researchers and Muslim leaders estimate that there are now around twenty to thirty thousand Muslims in Poland. Some of the reasons why foreign Muslims come to Poland include: benefiting from business opportunities, studying, reconnecting with family, and escaping conflict in their own countries. The majority of Poland's Muslims come from Arabic speaking countries: Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia. But Muslims from Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, post-Soviet states, and Africa (mainly Somalia) have also recently taken up residence in the country. Likewise, large numbers of Muslims have arrived from the North Caucasus as a result of the second Chechen war which started in 1999. (Indeed, over 80 percent of all refugees in Poland are currently Chechens.) From a different perspective, a growing number of ethnic Poles are converting to Islam. Among these are Orientalists, Arabists, artists, young people searching for spiritual meaning, and those embracing Islam to marry. Members of these groups tend to join such organizations as the Association of Muslim Students, and, since its establishment in 2001, the Muslim League in Poland.

The Tatar community

Islam in Poland is diversely expressed; there are even small Shiite and Ahmadiyya communities, though their influence is relatively insignificant. By far the most populous group, Sunni Muslims, is divided between two main sub-groups: the historically well established Polish Tatars; and members of the aforementioned Muslim League. Poland's "indigenous" Muslims, the Polish Tatars, have been living in Poland since the fourteenth century. They are often presented as a model example of successful integration. While undergoing profound acculturation – their social and economic situation does not differ from that of other ethnic Poles – they nevertheless manage to retain their Muslim faith. The Tatars emphasize their attachment to Poland and their contribution to its development. Many Tatars identify themselves as Poles of Tatar origin. Under the communist regime, a decline in Islamic practice and knowledge among the Tatars was observed, but nowadays a cultural and religious revival is taking place within the same circles.

Before the outbreak of the WWII, Tatar leaders set up *muftiat* (Islamic council) headed by a mufti, which provided for the imams' education, and for the religious needs of the community. In 1925, the Muslim Religious Association was established; thereafter, the Tatars managed to pass the Act on the Relations between the Polish State and the association. Because of their industriousness, those Muslims arriving in Poland during the last decades of the twentieth century found a well-

Poland's Muslim population is comprised of two distinct communities: Polish Tatars and Muslim immigrants. Despite demographic and ethnic differences, the groups resemble one another in their insistence that Muslims in Poland are not impervious to assimilation and modernization. Through the approaches of Euro-Islam, as adopted by the Polish Tatars, and *Wasatiyya*, promoted by Muslim immigrants, these Muslims grapple to find a response to radicalism and to present a moderate face to their fellow Poles.

organized Muslim community in good relations with the state.

The Muslim League

Poland's Muslim League, by contrast, is a relatively new organization, which despite its lack of experience has proved enormously popular among Polish Muslims especially recent immigrants, refugees, and Polish converts. There are already eight local centres in the main cities in Poland and, although formal membership is limited, it ap-

pears likely that many other Muslims are engaged, at some level, in their activities. Arabs seem to play a vital role among its active members. From an international perspective, the Muslim League pushes for the development of contacts with Western European Muslim organizations, such as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe. Most importantly, the Muslim League is the main proponent of *Wasatiyya*.

Despite their success in Polish society, the newcomers have so far distanced themselves from the Tatars. This has led to an air of competition between the two groups. In 2004, the Muslim League gained the status of an Islamic religious association, a status previously limited to the Muslim Religious Association founded by the Tatars. In riposte, two months later, the Tatars appointed a young Tatar, Tomasz Miskiewicz, as Mufti of Poland.

Paradoxically, instead of trying to help each other out, the two comparably moderate organizations now struggle for leadership over Poland's Muslim communities. Both present an Islamic solution compatible with the values of liberal democracy to radicalism. Likewise, both groups make an effort to present Islam to Catholic Poles; and to combat the damaging stereotypes that have arisen since 2001. The Tatars emphasize their patriotism, referring to historical ties with Polish society. Conversely, the League's newcomers prefer ideological arguments and the reinterpretation of Islamic concepts to argue their cause. Tatar intellectuals, such as Selim Chazbijewicz describe Tatar religious ideas as "Euro-Islam"; while Muslim League scholars, such as Samir Ismail, highlight the importance of *Wasatiyya*.² Thus, in different ways, both groups work at the same task.

The nature of the relationship between Tatar and non-Tatar Muslims is complex. Many members of the Tatar community, especially the older generation, stress cultural differences between their group and the Arabs (the largest percentage of Muslim immigrants in Poland). The newcomers point to elements in the Tatar tradition that contradict "pure Islam" (e.g. the buying of Christmas trees) and criticize Tatars for their insufficient religious knowledge and lackadaisical habits in worship. Pressure from Arab activists has made some Tatars avoid further contacts. Aware of the risk of being marginalized, other Tatars see potential advantages to cooperation. Moreover, such relationships can contribute to a revival of religious feeling among Tatars. In Białystok, for instance, an important Muslim centre in northeastern Poland, incoming students from Muslim countries organize religious lessons and other activities for the Tatar youth.

Transforming Islamic traditions

The Tatars have managed to assimilate into Polish society while maintaining their Muslim identities. It has been a gradual process through which aspects of Muslim tradition have been Europeanized. The same process has been supported by privileges granted to Tatar communities, and eased by the key role played historically by Tatars in the Polish army. "Polish Islam" acquired many elements from Polish Christian culture. The Tatar understanding of Islam stresses similarities with Chris-

tianity; notably, it accepts the separation of religion from state. An important point of reference in contemporary Tatar thought are Muslim reformist movements, especially the modernization trends, such as Jadidism, that developed in Russian Islam in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, while Polish Tatars lived separate from the rest of the Muslim world for most of their history, the emergence of moderate Islam among Tatars resulted from their daily interactions with people from different faiths, rather than through theological debate.

More problematic is the situation of Muslim newcomers who often find life in European societies inconsistent with Islamic rulings. In this regard, the League claims to speak for all Sunni Muslim immigrants and proposes *Wasatiyya* as a way to avoid the growth of parallel societies. Further, it places special responsibility on the shoulders of local imams to ensure that this does not happen.

The imams that uphold the need for *Wasatiyya* also emphasize the need for *ijtihad* (independent legal reasoning) in modern Polish settings. For these imams, *ijtihad* acts as a means of strengthening their authority in such settings. Many issues, such as keeping a dog in a house, in vitro fertilization, the holding of bank accounts, and changing of the prayer times to accommodate working hours, may cause problems within immigrant Muslim communities. Exercising *ijtihad*, imams tend to tolerate such matters on the grounds of a ruling by the chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, the exiled Egyptian Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi which states that a Muslim should strive to obey the basic sources of Islam, but be flexible in secondary matters.

In recent years, such pragmatic solutions seem to have been gaining ground in Poland. This *ijtihad*-friendly approach allows religiously oriented Muslims to legitimize changes in their lifestyles that suit life in the modern western world. "We want to live practically, not like slaves," a young Muslim woman told me.

Interestingly, immigrant Muslims can even serve to moderate the opinions of local Polish converts. A young Muslim convert wanted to break with his Christian background and duly announced that Christmas was haram. Quoting from the Sunna to show how Islam encourages respect for one's parents, his Arab friends convinced him that he should not boycott a family gathering as important as Christmas.³

Contributing to the spread of moderate ideas is the fact that, to date, there have been no serious outbreaks of conflict between Muslims and the state. In fact, in Poland, leading Islamic organizations cooperate with public authorities and representatives of other religions. Since 1997, for instance, the Joint Council of Catholics and Muslims has worked on developing inter-religious dialogue. Despite the sudden influx of Muslims into Poland over the last decade, there are no Muslim ghettos. Rather, the immigrants learn Polish, and many of them work as doctors, businessmen, or scientists.

Of course, there have been instances of negative reactions to Muslims, verbal aggression, comments on the Muslim headscarf, or opposition to the idea of building a mosque in the centre of Kraków. Yet, such instances are comparatively rare. More worrying is the fact that the average Pole seems to know very little about Islam. Further, what people do know tends to be shaped by the media, which invariably focuses on the "Islamic threat." The lack of information available to the public is underlined by League activists, who regard the dissemination of "correct" material on Islam as a vital aspect of their mission. In Wrocław, for example, the Wrocław Muslim Centre of Culture and Education has been organizing special lessons about Islam for Polish youth. According to the organizers, these have been a great success.

Questions of interpretation

Characterized by attempts to form moderate western-Islamic forums and attitudes, the rise of the *Wasatiyya* movement marks the decline of Islamism. The leader of Poland's Muslim League, drawing on Qaradawi's concepts, defines *Wasatiyya* as a style that upholds main Islamic principles, while also permitting adaptation to modernity.⁴ The League claims that one of its aims is integration with wider Polish society without the sacrificing of Muslim identity. It therefore encourages its members to engage in positive cooperation with citizens of different religious backgrounds.



PHOTO BY DOBROSLAWA WIKTOR-MACH, 2008

**Tatar mosque
in Kruszyń, northeastern
Poland**

In terms of *'aqidah* (creed), the *Wasatiyya* relies not only on the Quran and Sunna, it also recommends "discernment in Sharia matters, independent of what is literally prescribed in Islamic scripture."⁵ Indeed, a well-known imam in Poland, Abi Ali Issa, who heads the Muslim Religious and Cultural Centre in Wrocław, has preached that it is the literal interpretation of the Quran, without due consideration of the ulama's opinions, that has contributed to the stereotyping of Muslims and Islam. In his opinion, classic terms in Islamic thought, such as *dar al-islam* (land of peace) and *dar al-harb* (land of war), can now properly be understood only in terms of safety. Thus, for instance, when there is a war going on, even a Muslim country may be classified as *dar al-harb*; while, as long as Muslims are still able to practice their religion, there should be no objection to regarding European countries as *dar al-islam*. Not surprisingly, the ongoing debate on these matters overlaps with another related debate on jihad; a concept which, Ali Abi Issa argues, may only be understood along defensive lines.

Muslim leaders in Poland, whether from the Tatar community or the Muslim League, universally praise the Sharia as superior to any human law code. At the same time, they accentuate such meanings and practices within the Sharia that may coexist comfortably alongside European values. Muslims linked to the League focus particularly on the moral connotations underpinning Islamic law. Values such as equality, nobility, and moral excellence are thus presented as intrinsically Islamic. In this way, moderate Islam is shown to oppose fundamentalist calls to rebel against the West.

The Tatar place similar emphasis on moral values embedded in the Sharia. Chazbijewicz speaks of a universal and liberal approach to the Sharia that is already widespread among members of his Tatar community.⁶ Largely, Tatars emphasize that the notions, norms, and ideas underpinning Islamic law exactly resemble those held by moderate Christian Poles.

Both styles of approach in Poland, *Wasatiyya* (Muslim League) and Euro-Islam (Tatars) constitute alternatives to prevailing representations of the Muslim world as anti-western and incapable of modernization. Clearly, neither approach eradicates all economic, social, or cultural problems. Many Muslims, especially those who have just arrived in Poland, feel culturally alienated and consequently reject what they feel to be the West's individualism and materialism. Nevertheless, as long as they can find suitable conditions in which to live, work, and worship in Polish society, moderate ideas will continue to flourish among the country's Muslim communities.

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Notes

1. Wasatiyya has its ideological roots in Egypt. See Sagi Polka, "The Centrist Stream in Egypt and its Role in the Public Discourse Surrounding the Shaping of the Country's Cultural Identity," *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 3 (July 2003): 39–64.
2. Samir Ismail, *The Civilization of the Centre (Alwasateiah)* [in Polish], at http://www.islam.info.pl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=208&Itemid=8
3. Marek Kubicki, *Christmas and Muslims* (in Polish), at www.arabia.pl/content/view/291333/160/.
4. Ismail, *Civilization*.
5. Eric Brown, "After the Ramadan Affair: New Trends in Islamism in the West," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, 2 (2005): 7–29, at www.hudson.org/files/publications/Current_Trends_Islamist_Ideology_v2.pdf.
6. Selim Chazbijewicz, "Turning a Face towards the East and West [in Polish]," *The Polish Tatars Yearly* 11 (2006).