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### Citation

Grillo, R. D., & Soares, B. F. (2005). Transnational Islam in Western Europe. *Isim Review*, (15), 11. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9543>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Transnational Islam in Western Europe

Sixteen years ago the publication of Gerholm and Lithman's collection of essays *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*<sup>2</sup> was an important first attempt to try to understand the so-called "presence" of Muslims on the continent. Since then, the literature has expanded exponentially with detailed monographs and overviews now available for many countries and for Europe as a whole. This increasing academic attention reflects the changing nature of the Muslim population and its significance for societies which in varying degrees see themselves as "multicultural." There are now some 10-15 million Muslims in Western Europe, and compared with the 1980s they are more widespread (e.g. in Italy and Spain) and come from a wider range of societies of origin (Africa, the Middle East, South and Central Asia, the Balkans), than even 16 years ago, and as well as migrants they include many refugees. The Muslim presence is not only wider, but deeper. In many places, the early circulatory migration of Muslim men from former colonies to the metropole has given way to the settlement of families and the coming of age of second and third generations, with enormous implications during periods of economic change and uncertainty and in a post-9/11 world.

Though many Muslims are now long-term migrants and refugees and/or have been born and raised in the countries of immigration, the relationship with societies of origin has not diminished, on the contrary, and this is one way transnationalism enters. The significance of transnationalism or what is now understood as the transnational character of Islam and of migrant populations who espouse it, was not fully apparent or appreciated 16 years ago, and remains under-researched despite studies which have placed Islam in the context of globalization. Transnationalism is not, however, a single phenomenon. There are different ways of living transnationally; transnational Islam takes numerous forms.

West African Muslims from Senegal or Mali for example, often practice Islam within the context of transnational labour migration circuits. Although residing in France or Italy, their lives are firmly "anchored" in West Africa. Their presence in Europe is temporary and they associate Islam with "home." Others, Turks in Germany, Pakistanis or Iranians in Britain, North Africans in France, are more firmly rooted in their country of residence, but pursue bi-national or pluri-national agendas. That is, they operate in two or more nation-state systems, engaging, albeit in different ways, with the culture, society, economy, politics, and not least, religion of each. Nonetheless, there may be considerable diversity both within and between such populations in the extent to which they do so. Iranian Sufis in Britain, for example, have relatively little to do with other Muslims or with addressing British institutions, but are heavily concerned with the situation in Iran and with the internationally distributed Iranian exile community. Pakistani Muslims are often fully engaged with British institutions through mosques, British political parties, participation in local government etc.

Another way in which Muslims may operate transnationally is through the idea of the ummah, the global Islamic "imagined" community many Muslims, as well as analysts, frequently invoke. Although the ummah remains abstract and de-territorialized, case studies from many parts of Europe show how watershed events (debates about the hijab on the one hand, wars in Afghanistan or Iraq on the other) lead to a heightened sense of a transnational community. At the same time, national, ethnic, doctrinal or sectarian differences within the Muslim population continue to be important. Against the wishful thinking of Islamists (and the exuberance of students of cultural studies and cosmopolitan intel-

**Islam is undeniably transnational, yet Muslims may experience transnationalism differently depending on their countries of origin and residence and mode of settlement. This article indicates some of the various ways in which Islam and transnationalism intersect and suggests how transnationalism impinges on contemporary debates about how to live as a Muslim in Western Europe and on the emergence of a "European Islam" or "European-Muslim" identity.<sup>1</sup>**

lectuals) transnational has not meant post-national.

The importance of the ummah for Muslims in Europe is that it constitutes a transnational public sphere, a network of relations and institutions encompassing but extending beyond Europe to include scholars and authorities throughout the Muslim world. This transnational Muslim public sphere intersects with other public spheres in Europe, and this has implications for the way in which

the important question of what it means to be a Muslim in Europe is being addressed.

European nation states have been defined by both religious (Judeo-Christian) traditions and secular (liberal-democratic) ideals which often make it seem difficult if not impossible to accommodate Islam. Consequently, the question whether and if so how, one might live as a Muslim in Europe is widely debated by both Muslims and non-Muslims. There is no definitive answer. Various routes are being explored, some more quietist, some more secular, some more clamorous, some more negotiatory. Contemporary discussions of "European Islam" illustrate some of these responses. Whether concerned with the construction of "European-Muslim" as a (hyphenated) personal or collective identity, or with "European Islam" as a set of Islamic ideas, institutions, and practices specific to the European context, these discussions are key sites for understanding the intersection of Islam, transnationalism, and the public sphere in Europe.

**RALPH GRILLO &  
BENJAMIN F. SOARES**

#### Notes

1. This article is based on a recent collection edited by Ralph Grillo and Benjamin F. Soares in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: Special Issue on Islam, Transnationalism and the Public Sphere in Western Europe* 30, no. 5 (2004). Contributors include John Bowen, Heiko Henkel, Kira Kosnick, Bruno Riccio, Ruba Salih, Armando Salvatore, Kathryn Spellman, and Prina Werbner.
2. *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe*, ed. T. Gerholm and G.Y. Lithman (London: Mansell Publishing, 1988).



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**A protest  
against racism  
in Hamburg,  
24 August 2002**

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