

EU Muslims: seeking jihad or democracy?

By Simon Kuper

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The faithful emerging from an Amsterdam mosque after prayers gather on the pavement, grumbling about Dutch healthcare costs.

The scene is described by Jean Tillie, professor of political science at the University of Amsterdam, to illustrate how European Muslims engage in politics: they are overwhelmingly concerned with domestic bread-and-butter issues.

The politics of the EU's 16m Muslims is a much-discussed topic. Some commentators, particularly in the US, portray these followers of Islam as a unified bloc, pushing European nations towards radical policies.

"The French government's stance against the Iraq war and US foreign policy more generally seeks in part to appease Muslim opinion," the thinker and writer Francis Fukuyama wrote in 2004.

According to the American author Bruce Bawer, the previous French president, Jacques Chirac, "wouldn't have dared risk angering French Muslims by participating in the ouster of a man – Saddam – who was a hero to millions of them".

Omer Taspinar, research fellow at the Brookings Institution, says European Muslims "are becoming a more powerful political force than the fabled Arab street".

Academics who study European Muslims argue, however, that in most countries few of them vote; they are not a cohesive voting bloc; and the overwhelming majority supports democracy and mainstream European parties – generally of the left. European Muslim parties exist, such as France's Euro-Palestine List, and gain media attention but hardly any votes.

Jytte Klausen, a political scientist at Brandeis University in Maryland, says: "In most [European] countries, only 10 to 25 per cent of the Muslim population can vote." The others are either too young or not citizens, she says. For instance, only about 500,000 of Germany's 3.2m Muslims are enfranchised. Two exceptions are the Netherlands, where perhaps half of Dutch Turks and Moroccans are citizens, and the UK, where enfranchised Muslims vote more than their fellow citizens. Generally, she says, political parties can ignore Muslims "at very little cost".

In a French study, Jonathan Laurence and Justin Vaisse observed: "There is no such thing as 'the Muslim community'." As an example of differences, they say the French Muslim Council spent weeks disputing the ending dates for Ramadan.

Some politicians have tried to court a Muslim vote. But as Prof Tillie notes, there are usually more votes to be found on the anti-Muslim far right. A Dutch rightwinger, Geert Wilders, who proposes banning the Koran, would get about 13 per cent of Dutch votes, polls suggest.

It is mainly in Britain that foreign policy "is very important for Muslim voters – more than for anyone else", says Prof Klausen. Many abandoned Labour, their traditional political home, after the Blair government backed the Iraq war. When polled on their political priorities, French Muslims put "social inequality" first. "France's role in the world" was 12th.

Olivier Roy, a French scholar of Islam, objects to some descriptions of the 2005 French riots as "the intifada of the banlieues". He notes "the complete absence of Palestinian flags, references to wars in Iraq or elsewhere in the Muslim world – or even symbols of Islam".

Did Muslims influence France and Germany's opposition to the war? Patrick Weil, political scientist at the University of Paris 1-Sorbonne, says: "It's the same argument as saying the Bush decision to go to Iraq was because of the pro-Israeli lobby."

Most European Muslims did oppose the war, but so did most non-Muslims. Britain went to war despite

Muslim opposition, just as France banned the headscarf from schools despite it.

But a tiny minority of Europe's Muslims seek political influence through other means: terrorism. The most plausible case was the Madrid bombings in 2004. Three days later, the Socialists, who opposed the Iraqi war, surprisingly won the Spanish elections.

This was partly because the conservative government was perceived to have misled voters by wrongly blaming Basque separatists for the attacks. However, Robin Niblett, executive vice-president of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, said a minority of voters "may indeed have wanted to punish [former] prime minister Aznar for putting Spaniards directly in the terrorists cross-hairs".

If politicians take the risk of terrorist attacks into account when they make foreign policy decisions, then several hundred would-be jihadis have more influence on European policies than do their 16m fellow European Muslims.

This is the third in an eight-part series on Muslims in Europe. The next will focus on Muslims in France

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