

## **Anti-Islamic Discourses in Europe: Agents and Contents**

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### **Introduction**

First of all I want to thank the organizers of this conference very much for the invitation. It is finally an opportunity for me to personally get to know the colleagues with whom I have worked virtually together for nearly one year.

I greatly appreciate the use of the term “anti-Islamic” instead of “Islamophobic” for this panel. As Marcel Maussen put it at the beginning of his country report the term ‘Islamophobic’ is a quite nondistinctive term which suggests “different forms of discourse, speech and acts” addressing Islam and Muslims in a devaluating and insulting way “emanate from an ideological core, which is ‘fear’ or a ‘phobia’ of Islam” (p.40).

The term “anti-Islamic” does not express an ideological foundation and in addition this term possesses a much more active connotation than ‘Islamophobia’. The actor in an anti-Islamic discourse intends to speak against Islam and Muslims whereas Islamophobia may well be an attitude not very much reflected by those who speak or act in that respect. I would like to stress at this point that speaking against Islam and Muslim groups is everybody’s right, even if it is done in a demeaning or offensive manner. Thus the focus in the following paragraphs is not how Islam and Muslims are criticized but to the extent this critique is used as a means to serve the interests of power relations.

In my paper on anti-Islamic discourses in Europe I will not touch the legal and political sphere. My main focus will be the discourse in the public sphere by leading voices in the media academic Islam-experts (recently addressed as Islam-criticisers) and various representatives of different NGO’s.

### **Anti-Islamic Contents**

As Riem Spielhaus stated in her paper presented in Paris, there are major topics and stereotypes concerning Muslims that occur after 9/11 in all European countries included in this report. I do not want to go into details here because Riem already did but I want to sum up these topics and stereotypes as a reminder of the same topic that was discussed by today’s panel in July in Paris.

Some of the main common topics and stereotypes on Muslims is the division of Muslims into good and bad Muslims. In this discourse good Muslims represent some kind of a Euro-Islam (Bassam Tibi) which seems to include an understanding of a Muslim not practising religion publicly and thus not being visible as a Muslim in public. Likewise bad Muslims stick to a traditionalist understanding of Islam which is represented in Islamic clothing and publicly practised religion. In addition only those Muslims who continuously condemn islamicist terrorism in public are regarded as good whereas bad Muslims remain silent. Remaining silent likened to an acceptance of terrorism.

Another, *second* line in the common discourse on Muslims is their presentation as a monolithic block. This approach is reflected in the use of the term “Them” for all Muslims and ‘Us’ by Germans, French, British etc. The distinction between “Them” and “Us” is symptomatic for the assertion that Islam in principal is incompatible with major European ideals like democracy, sexual equality, and rejection of violence as a means of policy. To put it shortly: Islam is seen as not compatible with humanism and freedom of the individual. Thus Islam is regarded as a threat to the achievements of the European age of enlightenment.

In a common *third* line of argumentation Muslims not only are different and their religion incompatible with European culture(s) but also their presence in Europe is regarded as a threat to it. This viewpoint culminates in the claim that Europe is running a great risk of being conquered by Islam through immigration, naturalization and birth rates. In consequence defenders of this argument are convinced that because of a growing Muslim community Europe is in danger of loosing its Christian based cultural identity.

In a *forth* line of argumentation the term “Islamophobia” itself is in the centre of the critique. It is stated that the term was especially used by Islamists as a means of hindering legitimate criticism of Islam or Muslims. According to this position Muslims show that they are unable to accept criticism of their religion by naming every critique of Islam and Muslims as islamophobic. By doing so, the Muslim aggressors present themselves as victims whereas they themselves were the perpetrators.

These four topics outline the main contents of Anti-Islamic discourses in Europe. The current discourse on Islam in society and policy is both absorbed by the media and developed and

spread by them. Thus the media are reactor and actor alike. For this reason I will consider the media coverage of Islam first and then turn to some individuals as actors in this discourse who get extensive media attention for their anti-Islamic statements. I will especially focus on those Muslim born actors who gained much popularity with their openly anti-Islamic performance.

### **Media coverage on Islam**

A comparison of the country reports shows that Anti-Islamic attitudes are not a characteristic of a common mainstream of the media. Nevertheless anti-Islamic articles can be found in very different politically oriented Journals and Newspapers, marginal media of sub-cultural streams as well as central organs of the leading intellectual and administrative groups. These articles and reports have dramatically increased after 9/11 in all the countries in our research focus. In this respect the European media seem to show a particular interest in questions of gender power and politics. Differences in the understanding of sexual equality are seen as the crucial point of difference between the European or national culture and the Islamic culture. Domestic Muslims are held responsible for global Muslim terrorist activities. Their critical reaction on Islamicist terrorism is seen as a litmus test for their identification with the national state or Europe as a whole. Islam as a whole is presented as a societal problem, a barrier for integration while social circumstances of Muslims as an urban sub-proletariat in European cities are neglected. The discourse presented is anti-Islamic because it is not balanced as a pro-contra discussion but very often presents only a collection of arguments against the compatibility of Islam and life in a Western society. What Alexandre Caeiro states for the French situation can also be transferred to the German context. Media tends to adopt negative public attitudes and prejudices rather than being informative and balanced. This can be seen mainly when those voices that follow the mainstream on Islam and Muslims as a danger to society are given space for articulation. It is quite hard to find editors for articles that try to give a more differentiated view on the issue. In the public and political discourse, as reflected in the media, Islam has become a central part of the struggles of contemporary French, German, Dutch, Italian identity.

Interestingly Spain seems to be an exception in this respect. The Media there have agreed on not using the term “Islamic terrorism” as a collective term but the actual names of the assaulting terrorist groups. Prime Minister Zapatero postpones Islamic Terrorism under International Terrorism. As Jose Maria Ortuno Aix states: “In General the main newspapers take care to demonstrate political correctness in all their articles on this subject” (p.233).

## **Anti-Islamic actors**

### **a.) Non-Muslims**

Non-Muslim politicians, intellectuals as well as so called and “real” experts on Islam who openly express their anti-Islamic opinions seem to gain more and more publicity. They play an increasing role in the Anti-Islamic discourse. Where knowledge on Islam and Muslims is poor and fear of Muslims and Islam is great people who seem to know more and have a clear notion of how the issue has to be understood and be tackled get a major role in the process of public opinion building. People like Hans-Peter Raddatz in Germany, Oriana Falacci in Italy or Caroline Fourest and Michel Houellebecq in France or perhaps Poly Toynbee in Britain present themselves successfully as courageous tellers of the truth in the face of moral relativists (in the Netherlands and Germany called ‘naïve multiculturalists’) and dangerous Muslims. No further differentiation between Islam and understandings of Islam, between theory and practise and different cultural influences on the understanding of Islam is made by these spokesmen and this makes their analyses so easy to follow and to adopt by the masses: their ideas and arguments are seen to be common sense.

They gain support from quite contradictory signals of some state representatives in Europe towards Muslims and the non-Muslim public in Europe. Suspicion against Islamic activities – which is for instance expressed in the request of the German Minister of the Interior Wolfgang Schäuble that German should be the language of worship in mosques - aligns with symbolic actions to accept Islam as a permanent element of European societies. Interestingly both the French Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy and his German counterpart Schäuble initiated a symbolic recognition of Islam in their countries (Conseil français du culte musulman; Islamkonferenz) and at the same time continue to use discriminatory expressions concerning Muslims and their way of life. In fact these expressions are not as simple and populist as those of Berlusconi, who does not hesitate to state in public that “The west is superior” to Islamic culture.

### **b.) Authentic Muslims as anti-Islamic actors**

I will come now to the focus of my presentation: The authentic Muslims as experts on Islam. A very interesting phenomenon I want to analyse here is the rising importance of Muslim born intellectuals in the anti-Islamic discourse. Here we can find interesting coincidences in

three of the respective countries: Netherlands, Germany and France. It is quite striking that in addition to the non-Muslim Islam-Experts the public makes more and more use of Muslim spokespeople to legitimize a harsh critique on Islam and Muslims. Their criticism from the inside of Muslim society is regarded as authentic and plausible because individuals like Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands or Necla Kelek in particular or in some respect also Seyran Ates in Germany have a Muslim family background, hold academic or political titles or mandates which seem to give them legitimization and authorization to analyse phenomenon like: forced marriages, honour killings, female circumcision, and domestic violence. The value of their opinion derives also from the fact that leading politicians declare them as noteworthy experts. Some of them like Necla Kelek or Chardott Djavann (France) have gained status as official advisers to Ministers. Necla Kelek is advisor to the Ministry of Interior in questions of Muslim affairs (she is a permanent member of the recently established German wide Islamkonferenz) and also for migrant issues to the Ministry of Integration. Chardott Djavann was among the selected few invited for an audition at the Stasi Commission set up by Jacques Chirac to reflect upon the applications of laïcité. For all of these authentic criticsers the above-mentioned phenomena in Muslim families are directly based on Islam itself. The protagonists mentioned become especially valuable because they are without any restrictions willing to share the harsh critique on Islam as expressed by representatives of the non-Islamic majority society. Here I want to draw your attention to an interesting metamorphose they are undergoing in the process.

While Hirsi Ali and Kelek at the beginning of their media career as Islam-Experts stated they no longer regarded themselves as Muslims even though those in the media and politics continuously address them as examples of independent secular Muslims. With their critical approach to Islam they are regarded as ideal representatives of a modern form of Islam and thus defined as authentic 'good' Muslims. Interestingly – when addressed as Modern Muslim women none of them rejects the classification of being a Muslim. Because it is this combination of being both an 'authentic Muslim' and a women that makes them authoritative and powerful voices in the discourse on Islam as being oppressive against women. Their main topics are the abolition of the headscarf, the fight against domestic violence, against arranged or forced marriages, honour killings and, in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, against female circumcision. Their bestselling books oscillate between the currently very famous 'veil literature' and political pamphlets. The rhetoric is sharp. In their statements no special interpretations of Islam but only that Islam itself is incompatible with democracy and sexual

equality. To make their argumentation more convincing to the masses they mix empirical data and novel-like elements with narrations of their own family history. All the three women mentioned regard themselves as the voice of the oppressed women who cannot speak or are afraid to do so. Their common assumption is that all these phenomena are based on Islam itself and are covered by Islamic law, disregarding that in several of the cases of forced marriages, honour killings and female circumcision that became public, that the individuals were members of Oriental or African religious minorities, not Muslims. And also not taking into consideration the Fatwas of the leading European Ulemas who point out that these practises are not at all covered by Islamic law.

Like Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands Seyran Ates faces serious death threats because of her publicly expressed opinions on Islam and Muslim men. This has understandably led on the one hand to further discussions on the value of freedom of speech in the respective societies but it has also strengthened the symbolic role of the threatened critics of Islam (a newly established term for a profession created by media) in the discourse. Ironically it has also strengthened their role as authentic informants on the “real face of Islam” because it was then regarded as evident that Islam, as represented by the offenders, really is a religion of violence.

In this respect even assaultive and openly aggressive assertions against Islam can be expressed without showing any evidence for what is stated as the “hidden face of Islam”. Some of these protagonists (like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Necla Kelek, Chardott Djavann) have been awarded several times for their engagement for freedom of speech, intercultural understanding (!) and world freedom. Thus they gained some kind of official status as the “Oriental confirmer in duty” for the superiority of Western culture to Islam. This is a figure that is well known in the modern Literature of the East where the “Western confirmer in duty” has the role to confirm that he who is part of the western culture and knows oriental culture very well can confirm that oriental culture is superior (Wieland 1980). The mechanism here is the same: if in the eyes of an alien we are regarded as superior we must be superior.

### **A personal note instead of a conclusion**

Coming to the conclusion of my paper I want to point at my own role in this context. I assume most of the contributors to the report are not Muslims themselves. I myself, being a social scientist with a Turco-Muslim background who deals both scientifically and in NGO's with the issue of Islam in Germany, am part of the discursive platform in Germany. Reflecting this, I would like to give you an example about how I tried to intervene into the public discussion through the media and how this had to fail because of the strong position and popularity of the above-mentioned Muslim born protagonists of the anti-Islamic discourse and their incomparable higher access to the media.

After 9/11 the discourse in Germany on Islam was turning more and more into a polemic one. Realizing that other Muslim born scholars were part of an irrational public discussion on the 'total failure of multicultural society' and the responsibility of Islam for that, together with a group of 60 colleagues I started an initiative in the German weekly Newspaper "Die Zeit" to draw the attention of the public to the emotionalised and irrational form of discourse on Islam. We called for a more scientifically based discussion on the integration of Muslim migrants instead of stereotyping Muslims and Islam. We criticised in particular those, who made the religion responsible for all the problems the integration process of Muslims into Germany poses. Our call provoked very sharp reactions on the side of those whom we addressed: Necla Kelek and Seyran Ates. While Necla Kelek answered with a well arranged media campaign (she managed to place the same article in three well established daily newspapers on the same day) in which she accused us – the scientific community – of being jealous of her access to state representatives and to funding, another protagonist interfered quite unexpected in the discussion: the well known German Feminist Alice Schwarzer. In her feminist quarterly "Emma" and in the influential conservative daily Newspaper "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" she published the same article, claiming she knew that I was a defender of the pro-headscarf league and a close friend of Islamist leaders in Germany and thus tried to mark me as a collaborator of Islamists.

It was an interesting experience to see what could happen if you – by means of the media – try to dismount Muslim born Islam criticisers who are proclaimed untouchable by a part of the public and policy because of their status as victims of Islamism. Although we have shown evidence that Necla Kelek faked her interview material and the analysis on which her political activism for the ban of forced marriages by law is based this did not prevent her receiving a

honour professorship at the University of Essen for her engagement for tolerance and understanding between the cultures, funded by the honourable Mercator-Foundation. It became clear that the lobby for the “Oriental Confirmer in duty” is strong enough to overcome serious critique on both the scientific outcome of Keleks work and her scientific ethic.

Thank you very much for your attention!