

IMMIGRATION AND ISLAM IN THE US AND WESTERN EUROPE: BARRIERS TO INCLUSION

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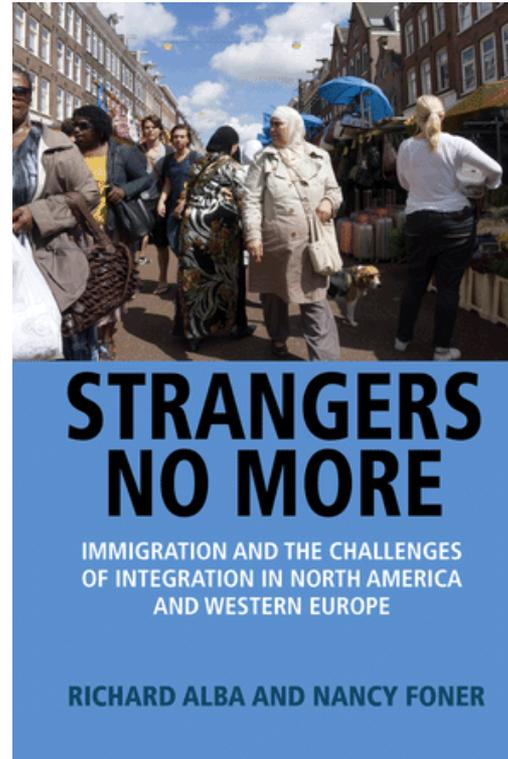
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Introduction

- Islam is a barrier for immigrants and their children in both the US and Western Europe.
- Yet: to only emphasize this similarity is misleading. Muslim immigrants and their children have become a greater source of contention and conflict, and Islam has become a more central divide between immigrants and the native majority population, in Western European societies than in the US.
- My talk: why this is so; first a few words about what is different in the US and Europe; and conclude with some comments about the future in the U.S. and implications for policy

Introduction

- Draws on larger study:



- Focus in Western Europe on France, Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands: home to more than 13 million Muslims, over two thirds of the Muslims in the European Union.

US-Western Europe comparison: what is different?

- At first glance, the notion that the US is more hospitable to Muslim immigrants and their children seems to fly in the face of evidence: anti-Muslim discourse in recent presidential campaign; cases of discrimination, bias incidents, and crimes; state surveillance since 9/11; surveys show substantial anti-Muslim sentiment
- But, Islam has not become a major cleavage between long established residents and a large segment of the immigrant-origin population and a frequent subject of public debate about immigrant integration the way it has in Western Europe.

What is different

- Immigration debates in US have not been “Islamicized” or systematically connected with anti-Islamic rhetoric as in Europe. Fears about the threat of Islam to core liberal values, such as free speech and gender equality, loom larger in Europe.
- Cultural practices associated with Islam, have not aroused the same kind of controversy in the US as in Western Europe. In France: burkini bans; banning of head scarf in public schools; public debate throughout Europe on black head-to-toe veiling.
- Widespread concern in Western Europe that a strong Muslim identity competes with or may even replace feelings of belonging to the national community. Public debates in US about immigration are less focused on national identity issues and fears about cultural fragmentation; in Europe anxieties about Muslims’ identities are a larger issue.

Why is it different?

- A major reason is different demographic characteristics of the Muslim population on the two sides of the Atlantic.
- A larger proportion of immigrants and their children are Muslim in Western Europe; in US, Muslims are a tiny proportion of the immigrant population, 4-8 percent.
- Islam in Western Europe associated with large immigrant groups which are among the most disadvantaged minorities in terms of poverty, unemployment, and education; in the US a substantial proportion of Muslim Americans are well-educated and middle class.

Why is it different

- A second reason: greater religiosity of Americans compared to more secular Europeans.
- In Western Europe, those who worship regularly and hold strong religious beliefs are a small minority and claims based on religion have much less acceptance than in the US. When the religion is Islam, with its demands on how followers conduct their lives, these claims often lead to public unease and sometimes anger.
- Europeans often feel their societies should not tolerate religious practices or cultural customs that conflict with liberal secular norms. And they expect religious conservatives, including Muslims, to tolerate behavior that they may consider morally abhorrent, such as open displays of sexuality.

Why is it different

- Third: historically-rooted relations and arrangements between the state and religious groups, which have created greater difficulties in accepting new religions than in the US.
- To be sure, European governments have begun to make some accommodations for Muslim religious practices, but despite these developments --- and despite the breaking of many links between church and state --- the institutional context continues to favor Christianity in many ways and marginalize Islam.

Why is it different

- Some examples:
- France: the state owns and maintains most Christian churches and allows them to be used for regular religious services, while most French mosques are makeshift structures in converted rooms in housing projects, garages, or basements
- Government support for religious schools has created other inequalities between long-established religions and Islam – e.g. Britain

Why is it different

- Fourth: more expansive conception of national identity in US vs. Western Europe.
- In Western Europe strong concern that a Muslim identity competes with or may even replace feelings of belonging to the national community; in US asserting a religious or ethnic identity goes hand in hand with being American.
- In continental Western Europe, immigrants and especially their 2nd generation children, feel pressure to express an exclusive national identity --- and combining a Muslim identity with a European one is quite challenging.

Why is it different

- In the US, hyphenated identities that combine a national identity with a religious or ethnic label are accepted as normal, expected, and even the American way. Immigrants and their children can be American and Muslim at the same time.
- In the US, ethnically-based religious congregations are recognized and accepted as part of the American immigrant experience. It is taken for granted that immigrants' religious institutions will not only reproduce and reassert aspects of home-country cultures but also provide the opportunity to learn how to successfully negotiate and become part of American society.

Why is it different

- To what extent asserting a Muslim identity helps immigrants and their children formulate claims to inclusion on American society is an open question in today's political climate.
- Yet protests and responses to discrimination among Muslim Americans have reflected an Americanization dynamic.
- Muslims often see their experiences as “another chapter in the American story of the fight for social inclusion that all racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have had to wage” (Cainkar 2009).

Conclusion: looking ahead

- Looking ahead, in the case of the U.S., to factors that may, on the one hand, heighten anti-Muslim sentiment and harden barriers confronting Muslim immigrants and their children and, on the other, factors that may reduce these barriers.
- Positive signs: historical record provides some optimism that Islam will come to have a more established place in U.S. society; prospects for white and light-skinned Muslim second generation who are economically and educationally successful and culturally assimilated; increased, and routine, contact between second-generation Muslims and long-established Americans in a range of settings.

Looking ahead and policies

- Less happily, dark clouds on the horizon: unforeseen events and controversies that increase hostility to U.S.-born Muslims and political attacks on them
- Policies can affect barriers that Muslim immigrants and their children experience: Importance of maintaining the bedrock American principle of separation of church and state; nature of public discourse among leading political and other national figures