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Sara Silvestri, ‘Misperceptions of the “Muslim diaspora”’, *Current History,* November 2016

The term “Muslim diaspora” is often used, in popular parlance, to refer to those Muslim populations that live in the West but are not native to it, and typically originate instead from the Middle East, North Africa, or Asia. Yet it is not a term commonly used by scholars of contemporary Islam in Europe, for instance, except when specific dimensions of the typical diaspora experience emerge, such as ethnonationalist sentiments and active political or economic mobilization related to the country of origin.

Key notions in common definitions of diaspora are the dispersal of a particular ethnonational group and the community’s retention of a transnational connection with its place of origin. The first references to a diaspora are in the Old Testament, recounting the life of Jewish communities in exile. The idea was later adopted metaphorically to de- scribe the role of Christians in the world. But probably no one would nowadays see the Christians living in United States (and here I am not speaking of the latest waves of refugees from the Middle East) as a diaspora community. So why juxtapose the words Islam and diaspora when talking about the Muslim citizens and inhabitants of Europe who could easily be native or settled inhabitants of this region, or might have at most tenuous connections with Muslim lands and ethnic groups?

The transnational and deterritorialized dimensions of religion are indeed central to the global articulations of Islam in the twenty-first century, as scholars such as Peter Mandaville and Olivier Roy remind us. But these factors alone are not sufficient evidence that Muslims constitute a diaspora. Rather, it is the abiding territorial connection with the origins of a community that defines whether we are dealing with a diaspora or not. This means that it is possible to meet, just in the United Kingdom, members of the Pakistani diaspora who are Muslim, or an Italian diaspora that is Catholic, or a Moroccan diaspora that is Muslim. But one could also come across the Pakistani Christian diaspora or the Italian evangelical diaspora, or Jewish members of the Moroccan diaspora.

In the past few years we have seen large numbers of people from Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq and Syria fleeing their homelands as a consequence of war and the political and selective imposition of Islamic religious norms. But it makes little sense to call them “Muslim diasporas” when, in fact, Christian and Yazidi minorities—as well as people with no particular faith—are among those who are emigrating and seeking refuge. The sweeping term Muslim diasporas also does not do justice to the pluralism and disagreements that exist within Islam. The widely known Sunni-Shia di- vide represents only the surface of these dynamics.

Islam is practiced, understood, and lived in a wide variety of ways, not only in different countries, by different groups and individuals—per- haps within the same sociocultural or ethnic environment, or even within the same family. Each subgroup has distinct leanings and preferences— spiritual, intellectual, and political—and its own theological points of reference.

More specifically, “Muslim diaspora” seems an inappropriate way to describe those Muslims who were born, and reside, outside countries where Is- lam is a majority religion. The traditional concept of diaspora, which refers to the experience of exile and migration—forced or self-imposed—does not encompass the circumstances of all Muslims who have settled in Europe or in North America or elsewhere. While many are likely to be descendants of immigrants, they themselves may not have lived in or perhaps even visited the countries their parents or grandparents came from.

Or consider the offspring of mixed couples, where one parent is an indigenous European and the other is an immigrant: should they be categorized as autochthonous or as members of a diaspora? And what would either definition entail in terms of legal rights or in mechanisms of social inclusion or exclusion?

What about the increasing numbers of Westerners who have converted to Islam? Would the blanket notion of diaspora all of a sudden apply to them, simply because they professed the faith? If so, would their emotional ties, political and ethnic identities, and sense of belonging immediately be subsumed by a presumedly preemptive diasporic dimension? And what would be the implications of all these dynamics for our under- standing of citizenship and of religious belonging in democratic, secular countries characterized by various degrees of separation between religion and public life?

In this era of globalization, transnational net- works, and rapid technological interconnected- ness, the diaspora experience might be a universal one. The main religious traditions all share references to journeys and emigration experiences as metaphors for the human condition. From that perspective, there is nothing exceptional about Islam.

Dynamic Traditions

Embracing and practicing a religion always entails a certain degree of both being influenced by and adapting to the local culture. Even though religions make claims to authenticity through references to a sacrosanct notion of "tradition," anthropologists teach us that traditions are not, after all, fixed and eternal but rather are constantly renegotiated and reinvented, in different contexts and historical periods, by individuals and by groups.

Contrary to some frequent assumptions about the presumed dogmatism, resistance to secular- ism, and lack of flexibility of Islamic tradition and sharia, Islam has in fact been particularly prone to adaptation and diversification across history and in different parts of the world. This might be due to a lack of a church-like, overarching institutionalized structure that can compellingly hold together and steer communities toward particular ideas, conventions, norms, and practices. While the pillars of Islam remain fixed, the forces that promulgate norms and practices are polycentric. Yet this fragmentation and lack of hierarchy have led to a competition for religious authority, which in some circles has ended up legitimating violent articulations of Islam.

Transnational forces are a key feature of our times, prompting international relations scholars to question the authority of the state and its relevance as a unit of political analysis. Transnational corporations and social movements are now considered key actors. Faith-based transnational mobilization—which is a feature inherent in all religions that have a universal reach—has emerged as another important force. From this perspective as well, Islam does not appear to be particularly special, or to follow a logic or practice outreach that is much different from that of other faiths, especially the mainstream monotheistic traditions. Yet we often receive the impression that “Muslim diasporas” (a synonym for “transnational” networks) are mobilizing more vocally and vigorously than other communities.

The current migration and refugee crisis may be reinforcing unwarranted assumptions about Muslims. Large numbers of people are fleeing from countries where Islam is a majority religion, but public opinion often seems to conflate their ethnic origin, religious affiliation, and national identities into a single, all-encompassing identity based solely on the predominant religion of the religion they are coming from. Thus, all Syrians or all Palestinians are perceived in Europe, Australia, and the United States as part of a “Muslim diaspora,” not Syrian or Palestinian or Lebanese diasporas, which incidentally are national communities that include a considerable number of Christians.

LOOSE FAMILY

The existence and spread of controversial net- works such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and the Jaamat-i-Islami, which occupy different places on the wide spectrum of Islamist thought, are also often mistakenly depicted as diasporic phenomena. In fact, though they may have specific ethnic cores and audiences, they operate glob- ally thanks to the collaboration of members and supporters, including converts, who have varied leanings and origins. Groupings that are connected with the large but loose family of the Muslim Brotherhood, for example, may share some ideological points of reference and recognize key figures such as Hassan al-Banna or Sayyid Qutb, the movement’s founders. But they differentiate their goals, strategies, language, and modus operandi depending on a series of variables such as the characteristics of the political opposition they face and the social and ethnocultural contexts in which they are embedded.

As a result, it is almost impossible to detect a homogeneous and coherent diasporic mobilization among members of the Muslim Brotherhood. What we see instead is different ethnic groups (only some of which constitute a diaspora) mobilizing under the broad inspiration of the Brother- hood’s political ideals, with their efforts in some cases focused exclusively on their home countries. For example, some Brotherhood figures operated in and from Britain but with particular attention to the evolving political situation in Iraq or Egypt. But others in the movement—for example, the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France—have at other times focused on the condition of Muslim communities in Europe.

Take another broad transnational Islamist movement, Salafism, which is often associated with Saudi Arabia. While Salafis certainly exist in Saudi Arabia, Saudi nationals are not actually conspicuous among the members of Salafi networks that are expanding across Europe. These networks did not arise from any particular diaspora com- munity. Instead, they attract youth from widely varying ethnic backgrounds, both with and with- out immigrant origins. The practices that they disseminate in the name of Islamic orthodoxy are not associated with the “true” historic or cultural traditions of their followers but are the product of a sort of copy-and-paste Islam, to borrow the words of a Dutch colleague, Martijn de Koning.

Experts on the dynamics of conversion also tell us that Western converts often are among the most fervent enthusiasts of ultraorthodox practices, which purportedly emulate the style of dress, gender relations, and modes of communication that existed on the Arabian peninsula at the time of Muhammad. It is therefore impossible, or rather irrelevant, to seek to explain the spread of the niqab (female face veil) or of the burkini (full swim dress that leaves the face visible) by investigating the ancient practices of the Muslim com- munities where these fashions are taking root. One will quickly discover that the niqab, for instance, was not a mainstream feature of the Islamic faith among the Muslim communities that emigrated from Pakistan, Morocco, or Turkey into Europe forty or fifty years ago.

Finally, no single diaspora group or diaspora logic seems to be behind the sad reality that young Muslims, both those living in the secular West and those who have remained in Muslim- majority countries, are joining the extremist Islamic State (ISIS). Normally, diasporic political mobilization is understood as the activity of a people in exile seeking to effect change in their country of origin from afar, either by lobbying for changes in the foreign policy of the country in which they live, or by directly participating in or seeking to influence the political process in their homeland. When it comes to ISIS, though, none of its affiliates who have carried out terrorist attacks in Europe in the past few years was a member of the Syrian or Iraqi diaspora. In fact, most of the attackers have been European citizens, born and raised in European countries.

They may have belonged to ethnic minority groups, but do not seem to have participated in the kind of community activism associated with diasporas. While some of the groups of attackers did have common ethnic or national identities, that does not appear to explain their actions. Rather, the key common denominators among the attackers were a reliance on close networks of friends and family—some were brothers—and in particular, a previous history of petty crime and gang culture. Misperceptions and dynamics of social inclusion, rather than religious doctrine or diasporic mobilization, appear to be central to the attractive- ness of ISIS.

It would be misguided to identify European Islam as a monolith of like-minded people standing apart from the rest of secular Europe and its Judaic-Christian roots. Muslims in contemporary Europe absorb the political cultures and mentalities of the countries where they live. Even though there is some level of transnational communication along ethnic or ideological lines, the day-to-day life and thinking of Muslims in Europe are very much defined by the local and national context in which they have settled and are raising their families, and by the debates that are central to that culture and to their personal experiences.