ISLAM - RELIGION OR SECURITY THREAT?

AN ANALYSIS OF THE SECURITIZATION OF ISLAM IN THE WEST

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I. Introduction

“A clash ensues only when Islam or Christianity is misconstrued or manipulated for political or ideological ends.” (Pope John Paul II)

Corresponding to the conviction of Pope John Paul II, religions do not generally trigger conflict by themselves and can therefore not be regarded as sole cause for conflict. Nevertheless, historical experiences have highlighted tensions between different religious groups; in particular the relationship between Islam and Christianity has been one of continuous hostility. Since its first encounter in the seventh century, the Islamic faith has therefore been perceived as the “prime external challenge” to Christendom (Wheatcroft, 2003, p.39).

This perception of an Islamic threat to European States has been almost absent throughout the 20th century, because communism was widely perceived as the single most influential threat to western nations. Nevertheless, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Samuel Huntington has emphasized that “for peoples seeking identity […] enemies are essential, and the potentially most dangerous enmities occur across the fault lines between the world’s major civilizations” (Huntington, 1996, p.20). As a result, in this line of reasoning a clash of civilizations between the West and the Islam is likely to appear.

In addition, the increasing influx of Muslim migrants to European states as well as higher fertility rates of Muslims than Westerners have triggered public debates within European states about questions of integration. Whereas German Chancellor Merkel argued for the absolute failure of multiculturalism (CNN, 2010), others have emphasized the increasing securitization of migration in Europe (Ceyhan & Tsoukala, 2002; Bigo & Walker, 2002; Guild, 2003, Sasse, 2005; Huysmans, 2006). As the latter is often justified as response to terrorist attacks such as 9/11, public sentiments have increasingly related Islam with terrorism, creating an affiliation “as if most Muslims are terrorists or most terrorists are Muslims” (Halliday, 1999, p.892). Hence, anti-Muslim attitudes or so-called “Islamophobia” (ibid.) have been generated to the degree that people feel their own identity and values threatened by the Islam.

As a result, this paper aims at investigating how the growing perception of Islam as a threat to Western identities and values is able to occur and to what extent
politicians were successful in securitizing Islam. For the purpose of its analysis, this paper is subdivided intro three parts. First, it gives a short background on empirical facts and numbers about the Muslim community in Europe. Second, it makes use of the Copenhagen School approach of securitization to provide an analytical framework for the subsequent analyses. Third, it analyses the role of politicians in securitizing Islam and finally it concludes by evaluating their success and failures.

II. Facts and Misperception

In order to perceive the Islam as a security threat, certain preconditions have to be fulfilled. In particular, the Muslim presence and their future stance are crucial factors influencing the public opinion and facilitating its perception as a current or future threat to society. The European Union has currently 501 million inhabitants, among which 20 million people are Muslims (Financial, 2010). As a result, merely 4% of the total European population is of Islamic faith. However, the amount of Muslims has more than doubled over the last thirty years and expectations1 forecast that in 2050, the number of Muslims will increase up to 20% of the total European population (cf. Savage, 2004) - a fivefold increase in their total proportion. Here it has to be noted that these numbers do not differentiate between truly faithful believers and those who are decreasingly practicing their faith.

Nevertheless, one of the crucial factors is that the lack of interaction between Muslims and Europeans. Muslim communities are most likely to conglomerate in large industrialized urban districts where the interaction is often limited to the specific area they live in (e.g. Berlin Kreuzberg; Banlieues near Paris), thus they are creating their own society outside of the general population. These societies are often viewed outside of the realm of the normal city or state, as they are often denoted with terms relating to their geographical Muslim Origin; Kreuzberg, for instance, is sometimes identified as “Little Istanbul” (Tagesspiegel, 2009).

Furthermore, as they incline to identify themselves first and foremost with their religion rather than their city, region or state, Muslims are often viewed as one monolithic group, which is alienating themselves from the rest of society. Hence,

1Refers to data from 2004
even third generation Muslims, who are official citizens of the country where they reside in, can still be identified by the general public as immigrants and foreigners. This isolation has led to wide skepticism about Islam in the general population, which is often concerned with and anxious about Islamist ‘traditions’ such as the wearing of headscarves or burkas, as well as the building of mosques or Muslim schools within the Western state. Additionally, although these issues cannot be associated with terrorism or Islamic fundamentalists, through the culmination of hijacked planes and terrorist attacks by Islam fundamentalists, in particular 9/11, the Western skepticism about Islam has gradually increased, because the terrorist acts are generally identified as a indication for Islam’s failure to cope with European and Western norms and the clear distinction between extreme fundamentalist and solely faithful Muslims is not made in the way it should be done.

In particular, because most Western people are not in regular contact with Muslims, their picture of Islam relies on other sources such as the media. However,, the Western media is being accused of presenting “an oversimplified and static cultural concept” of the Islam (shaded & van Koningsveld, 2002, p.188), because they are establishing and fostering stereotypes vis-à-vis Muslims. Although the media rests of facts and figures in their stories, claims refer to inability to broadcast positive images about the Islam. In a study conducted by Hafez and Richter (2008), they highlighted that while 81% of news coverage of the German public broadcasting focus on negative subjects such as terrorism, integration problems, fundamentalism, religious intolerance human rights violations and suppression of women, while only 19% discuss everyday life, social issues, culture and religion. As a result, among other factors media coverage is seen as one of the factors contributing to the creation of “Islamophobia” in Western societies (Van Dijk, 1991).

As a result of these perceptions, politicians across Europe have implemented harsher laws, especially directed towards the Muslim community (Cesari, 2009, pp.10-12). The French and Belgium governments, for instance, have recently announced to ban burkas and niqabs in public (The Guardian, 2010a;2010b). Additionally, in Switzerland minarets have been banned and in Poland many people went on the street to protest against mosques. Despite their controversy, issues relating to such bans are still welcome by the majority of people, because they perceive the Islam as a threat to their society. In a public opinion poll in Austria, the majority (54%) proclaimed that they consider Islam to pose a “threat to the West” and
even further, 74% of Austrians believed that Muslims have an inability to adjust to their countries of residence (Wildman, 2010).

By outlining the underlying reasons why Europeans feel threatened by the Islam, this chapter has shown that a lot of the anti-Muslim public sentiment has been generated due to the lack of knowledge of Islam and the confusion between terrorism and Islam. Additionally, also the discourse about non-integration of Muslim communities has fostered anti-Muslim views, rising skepticism and doubts about the religion. In short, the Islam has been politicized since the end of the Cold War and discourse about a potential clash of civilization has become more and more prominent. However, instead of facilitating transparency and fostering integration, political discourse in Europe, in particular on the extreme right, has contributed further to the securitization of Islam. The next chapters will therefore be devoted to the way how Islam is being treated in the public and political discourse.

III. Theoretical framework – The creation of existential threats

Prior to analyzing this discourse, it is crucial to establish a theoretical framework, which demonstrates how a politicized issue can be securitized and subsequently perceived as a threat to the general public. In opposition to neo-realist arguments, the Copenhagen School (CHS) has identified that security is not an objective condition and that threats are not just resulting from the assessment of facts, but are socially constructed by securitizing actors. This takes place through securitization, a “discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat” (Buzan & Weaver, 2003, p.491). The theory emphasizes that any public issue can move along a scale, which ranges from non-politicized over politicized to securitized categorizations, as highlighted in Illustration 1 (Buzan, Weaver & De Wilde, 1998). A non-politicized issue is a public issue that is not included in a public debate, while a politicized issue refers to one which is currently debated in the public sphere and part of the public policy. The distinction between politicization and securitization is rather marginal but crucial. “Securitization can thus be seen as a more
extreme version of politicization” (ibid.); namely, an issue which is presented as “an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the bounds of political procedure” (ibid.).

Illustration 1. The Process of Securitization

The securitizing actor plays a vital role in this process, as he or she is responsible of formulating the threat through a speech act, in which “security is not of interest as a sign that refers to something more real; the utterance itself is the act. By saying it, something is done (as in betting, giving a promise, naming a ship)”. To put it more in simple terms, something becomes a security challenge as soon the actor declare it to be so (Waever, 1995, pp.54-55). It is essential to note that the public or a general audience plays an important part in the process of securitization, because an issue can only be successfully securitized when the audience agrees with the actor and acknowledges the threat as real (Buzan, Waever & De Wilde, 1998, pp.25-42).

Illustration 2. Perceived challenges to one’s survival

Furthermore, the Copenhagen school highlights the importance of the referent object, which can be individuals, groups or issue areas and has to hold a genuine right for its existence. In contrast to neo-realist thinking, the CHS broadens the concept of
security into five different sectors (military, environmental, economic, societal & political), as shown in Illustration 2. As a result, actors are able to speak of preserving one’s identity when they talk about security threats, as Buzan argues that the security of a society “can be threatened by whatever puts its ‘we’ identity into jeopardy” (1993, p.42).

In the case of securitizing Islam as a danger to the survival of the Western identity, the model proposed by the Copenhagen School is highly beneficial when analyzing how the growing perception of Islam as a threat to Western identities and values is able to occur. First, securitizing actors are able to refer to one thing an mean another. When one is securitizing terrorism, he can also include the role of Muslims in acts of terrorism in his speech act, thereby indirectly targeting Islam. The advantage for the actor is that he will not be recognized as racist or xenophobic but rather as a patriot who is only worried about the security of his nation-state. In this case, it is easier to securitize Muslims via terrorism, because for the audience it is harder to identify terrorist, as “terror is a tactic, not the adversary” (Hutchings, 2004, p.70) and mostly, the audience is uncertain about who may or may not be a terrorist. As the last chapter has pointed out, the confusion between terrorism and Muslims has already existed prior to the securitization act.

Second, securitizing Islam is likely to be successful, as many political issues relating to Muslims can be used in order to highlight their threat to survival. The public discourse and public policies directed towards Islam can be related to migration, extremism, freedom of speech, respect for law, human rights abuses and the suppression of women, altogether sensitive issues to the Western identity. In particular, the lack of transparency and the skepticism towards Muslims by the Western population can be considered a boiling point and is likely to move from politicization towards securitization, which would means that extraordinary measures will be taken in order to diminish the threat.

Hence, as the previous chapter has already stressed, the public behavior towards Muslims and the Islam has already been politicized. Some would argue, that the distinction between a politicized issue and a securitized one is blurring, nevertheless, the case of the securitization of Islam, could clarify this ambiguity. Whereas, the influence of Islam in Western community is clearly politicized and triggered public awareness, so far the public as well as politicians have refrained from the use of extraordinary measures. Whereas some anti-Muslim legislation may have
been implemented (cf. Cesari, 2009), no clear security measures have been even taken into consideration. Illustration 3 outlines this differences, clarifying that skepticism and doubts about integration issues and Muslim schools or mosques are distinct from the exclusion of the Muslim community from the West as well as clear propositions linking Muslim individuals to terrorism just because they are Muslim.

**Illustration 3. Securitization of Islam**

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<td>integration questions</td>
<td>existential threat to Western</td>
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<td>skepticism</td>
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<td>multiculturalism</td>
<td>severe immigration floods</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim institutions</td>
<td>crucial link to terrorist activities</td>
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Therefore, even though the securitization of Islam can evoke fears among the Western population, it is crucial to note that the underlying rationale of securitization is a political choice (Buzan, Weaver & De Wilde, 1998, p.29). As a result, “enunciating security is never innocent or neutral” (Huysmans, 1999, p.26), nor is securitization. “In a time of rampant securitizations” (Nyers, 2004, p. 213), highlighting many issues which are proclaimed to challenge identities and sovereignty existentially, one always has to be careful of risking the idealization of national or Western security (Buzan et. Al., 1998, p.29), since “power holders can always try to use the instrument of securitization of an issue to gain control over it” (Waever, 1995, p.54). In terms of constructing the Islam as a security threat, radical right populist have emerged, proclaiming that Muslims are threatening European values and or Western identities by massive influx of immigration, close links to terrorist groups or exploiting the European social welfare system.

This section has investigated how a public issue can be securitized. The Copenhagen school emphasizes the security can be socially constructed and is dynamic. As a result, actors are able to securitize a public issue when it is perceived as an existential threat to one’s society or state sovereignty. Moreover, it has revealed that because of the controversy about Islam in the West, it is can likely be securitized and right-wing populist have tried to utilize securitization to gain political power and popularity. One of the main instruments for the process of securitization is a successful speech act, in which the audience plays a vital role in agreeing or disagreeing with the reality of a threat. Hence, the next chapter of this paper
demonstrates how the discourse on clash of civilization has gone overboard by exploiting anxieties of the public and how the Western audience reacted to it.

IV. An analysis of securitization on the far right

Since 9/11 terrorist attacks, the public discourse vis-à-vis Muslims has been increasingly securitized, as “pre-existing patterns of prejudice and discrimination have been reinforced and Muslims have increasingly felt that they are stigmatized because of their beliefs” (Rhodes in Gündüz, 2005, p.2). In particular hostile political slogans of rightist parties have portrayed “Muslims as ‘aliens’ to and ‘enemies’ of Europe” and led to “verbal and physical acts of violence against Muslims” (Gündüz, 2005, p.2). Gündüz highlights that in an IHF report (2005) examples of discrimination towards Muslims are inter alia negative rhetoric on Muslim immigrants as a ‘security threat’ by the Belgian Vlaams Blok and the Austrian Freedom Party, the disclosure that 80% of Germans equate ‘Islam’ with ‘terrorism’; and discriminatory hiring practices in Sweden (ibid.). At this point it has to be noted that there are approximately 1.2-1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. Thus, even if 10% would be associated with terrorism, that would equate around 120 to 160 million terrorists, which seems to be highly improbable. As a result, in order to securitize Islam, many right-wing populist politicians have embraced the clash of civilizations discourse cultivating it with racism, anti-Muslim nationalism and xenophobia. This analysis will take a closer look at the different speech acts by those securitizing actors, in particular focusing on the radical right.

   One of the crucial elements for right-wing populists is their politics of exclusion of a minority. As a result, those politicians saw an opportunity in the anxiety and lack of knowledge by Westerners towards Islam and thus, concentrated in diverse speech acts on “the juxtaposition of ‘European civilization’ and Christianity with Islam and non-European cultures” (Zaslove, 2004, p.75). This trend has become visible across the European continent: whereas Danish and Norwegian leader of the progress parties “warned against the threat from an invasion of Muslims intent on destroying Danish and Norwegian cultures”, the Lega Nord in Italy besides

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2 International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights
organizing anti-Muslim campaigns, highlighted that Christian immigrants should be
given priority (quoted in ibid.). Furthermore, Jean Marie Le-Pen in France, Jörg
Haider and H.C. Strache in Austria, Pim Fortuyn’ and most prominently Geert
Wilders in the Netherlands have engaged in several speech acts in order to securitize
and exclude the Islam.

In particular Geert Wilders has recently become prominent because of his
fight against the ‘Islamisation of the Netherlands’. In addition, Wilders has founded
an International Freedom Alliance in order to secure the European and Western
values and shared interest from the threat of the Islam. Therefore, the next section will
focus on his speech acts to show how right wing populists are able to securitize Islam.
When Wilders talks about the Islam, he makes specific use of connotations such as
“the powers of darkness, the force of hatred and the blight of ignorance” (Wilders,
2010a) in order to securitize their actions. In a speech at New York City (9/11/2010),
he openly opposes the establishment of a mosque near Ground Zero by claiming that
neither a Christian nor a Jew group would be allowed to build a church or synagogue
in the Arab world. By stressing that “in mecca, if your religion isn’t Islam, you are not
welcome” (ibid.), Wilders demonstrate that because the Islam excludes all non-
believers, they do not deserve freedom in the West for themselves. He argues further
that despite its tolerance, the West is “not a suicidal society” (ibid.). Using the term
suicidal refers to the existential danger that the Islam poses to the West. In other
words, when the West is lenient to the building of a mosque, it will destruct Western
identities and values in the long run. Consequently, Wilders refers to Islam as an
existential security threat to the West, thus securitizing it. Furthermore, his language
is of specific interest, as he uses connotations such as “liberty”, “democracy”,
“survival” and “freedom” when he is opposing to the establishment of mosques
(ibid.). However, when he talks about the terrorist attacks on 9/11, he argues that
“Muslim youths danced in the streets” and a majority of Muslims immigrants, who
are living in the Western World, “expressed partial or full understanding for the 9/11
terrorists” (Wilders, 2010a). Consequently, Wilders depicts Muslims as benumbed
monstrosities which oppose and hate the Western world. This hatred is illustrated as a
threat to the West, which has to restrict their access to Muslims in order to be free.

At another speech in Berlin in October 2010, Wilders has been more concrete

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3 Haider (2008) & Fortuyn (2002) are already deceased
about the existential threat of Islam, stating that “Germany’s national identity, its democracy and economic prosperity, is being threatened by the political ideology of Islam” (Wilders, 2010b). Similar to his speech in the USA, Wilders demonstrates that he is very well aware of the interest and sensitivity of particular societies. While in the United States he stressed liberty and freedom, in Germany their national identity, democracy and economic prosperity; in both cases issues which are highly crucial for their individual national identity. In addition, Wilders stresses that a “Germany full of mosques and veiled women is no longer the Germany of Goethe, Schiller and Heine, Bach and Mendelssohn” (ibid.). Again, it is visible how Wilders constructs mosques and veiled women as an enemy, a threat to German’s culture. Therefore, he calls for opposition to Islam, because “we do not deserve becoming strangers in our own land” (ibid.). Hence, Wilders talks about the “Islamization of Europe” and criticizes the current Western governments that they do not have a “strategy for dealing with the Islamic ideology, because our elite say that we must adapt to them rather than the other way around” (Wilders, 2010b). At this point, he attracts the feelings of Europeans about the problems of Muslim integration and their growth within Europe. One of his most striking arguments is that “Islam is the communism of today” (ibid). By comparing Islam with communism, he depicts Islam as a political ideology which is similar to the ideology which have separated the European continent and in particular, the German state in two halves, causing centuries of anxiety and uncertainty. Consequently, he does not only refer to the Islamic threat to national identity, but also to the sovereignty of the state, as it would alter the entire political system of the state.

As highlighted in the previous chapter, the process of securitization can only be deemed successful, if the audience response to the speech act and approves. As it is difficult to assess whether a securitization is successful or not, as there is no specific measurement given by the theory, this paper argues that securitization is successful if extraordinary measures are taken. In the case of the securitization of Islam, it would mean that Western policies towards Muslim communities or the Islam as whole would change.

As the most successful securitizing actor, Geert Wilders has established his own political party (PVV) in 2005. After gaining 9 seats in their first general election in 2006, the PVV got 15.5% of the total votes in the Netherlands and obtained 24 seats in the Dutch parliament in the last general election in 2010. As the third largest
political party in the Netherlands, the PVV is currently backing the government without participating in the cabinet. In December 2010, an election poll was conducted, showing that Wilder’s party (17.4%) is increasingly gaining support in the Netherlands (de Politieke Barometer, 2010). However, as extraordinary measures across Europe have not yet been implemented, this paper argues the securitization of Islam has failed so far. Nevertheless, the growing popularity of the ideas proposed by right-wing populists such as Wilders, not just in the Netherlands, but also in rest of Europe is to be treated with caution. The fact that Wilders has openly opposed Islam in New York City and Berlin emphasizes his dominant position and his fascination. However, it is crucial to emphasize that many protesters have objected to Wilders presence and content.

This section has shown that across Europe there has been a wave of right-wing politicians who are trying to securitize Islam. Nevertheless, despite some success on national level and the enhancement of political power, this process has not yet been successful and has, if anything, contributed more to a political debate, which highlights both sides of the spectrum rather than leading to the exclusion of the Islam from the West.

V. Conclusion

This paper has analyzed how a growing perception of Islam as a threat to Western identities and values is able to occur and to what extent politicians were successful in securitizing Islam. Prior to revealing the results of its analysis, it is important to note some of its limitations. Due to the limited scope of this paper, it solely focused on the process of Islam securitization in Europe. Therefore, it did not examine the counterarguments given by left-center parties and the reactions of the Muslim world, which should be subject to further research.

The paper has revealed that the relationship between the West and Islam is somewhat troubling. It has shown that the Islam and the integration of Muslims into the Western society have been politicized by several actors such as politicians and the media. In particular, questions about integration, skepticism about traditions and institutions relating to Islam have triggered public discourse and caused anxiety
throughout the public. Furthermore, it has exposed that right wing populists, by relating to these uncertainties, have attempted to securitize Islam as an existential threat to the Western civilization. Nevertheless, it became evident that notwithstanding some success on certain audiences, the general European and Western public has not agreed to the securitization, as extraordinary measures to secure Western values and identities have not yet been faced.

To conclude, this paper suggests to widen the public discourse and increase transparency between both religions, to approach the general fear and to elucidate misperceptions such as the confusion between Islam and terrorism, which could also limit the powers of right wing politicians such as Wilders, Haider or Kjaersgaard.
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