Europeans Struggle to Balance Old Ways With New Muslim Immigrants

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Byline: By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

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Body

Michel Gourdin, a French baker in the northern Paris suburb of Garges-les-Gonesse, remembers the day a year ago when gangs of unemployed North African ***Muslim*** youths wrecked his shop in a riot.

One gang member, he said, had been killed by a rival Asian group, and the North Africans, believing that the French police had let the suspected killer go, attacked the local precinct house and then all the French-owned businesses in the neighborhood.

"What I don't understand," Mr. Gourdin said, "is that some of them are involved in hard-core gang robberies and drugs. The police know who they are, but they don't do anything. I think they are afraid of provoking an even bigger explosion here if they do."

Garges is a working-class town of 45,000 people with housing projects built for refugees from France's colonial wars in North Africa. Today it has been transformed, like other cities throughout Europe, by ***Muslim*** ***immigrant*** families who suffer from the same problems of unemployment, high crime and bewildering social change that affect the ***Europeans*** who also live there.

Europe's effort to integrate its minority of 10 million to 13 million ***Muslims*** is in crisis. The crisis is more than a profound cultural conflict. It is one with grave echoes of racism, fundamentalism and fears of terrorism, and whether Europe succeeds or fails could have important lessons for the United States, with its own large, ***new*** ***Muslim*** presence.

But for Europe, so far, many of the signs are troubling.

"The sad fact is that interaction is very difficult and rare," said Ian Hastings, a Briton who grew up in India and who has chosen to live in the cultural and ethnic mix that East London has become today.

From the British National Party in London's East End to Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in Marseilles, racist far-right politicians openly appeal to white fears in the parts of Europe where local populations are being steadily replaced by ***immigrants***.

Mr. Le Pen, a candidate in the first round of the French presidential elections last month, won 15 percent of the vote nationwide, his strongest showing in two decades. A young Moroccan man drowned after skinheads who the police say were attending a Le Pen rally here on Monday pushed him into the Seine.

On Thursday night, unidentified people sprayed anti-Islamic graffiti on the walls of the Grand Mosque of Paris and defaced the entrance with black tar.

Government crackdowns on legal and illegal immigration in European countries have been prompted in part by the fear of right-wing demagoguery if the influx is not brought under control. Such moves have helped steal the thunder from the far-rightists in Britain and Germany.

Though modern urban crime and chronic high unemployment do not discriminate between ***Muslims*** and Christians in the poor European neighborhoods where the local and ***immigrant*** populations coexist, they do contribute to rising tensions.

Interviews in France, Britain and Germany, three Western European countries with heavy concentrations of ***Muslims*** in urban neighborhoods, show a range of attitudes toward ***Muslims*** of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It is estimated that there are five million ***Muslims*** in France, one million in Britain and two million in Germany.

The French View

Sharing Problems, Not the Blame

In Aulnay-sous-Bois, a residential sprawl north of Paris, Communist and Socialist-dominated governments over the years built housing projects intended for local French low-income families. Most of these apartments are now occupied by ***Muslim*** ***immigrants*** from Algeria.

One of the few remaining ethnic French residents of one project is Yves Hiestand, a 48-year-***old*** accountant who has been unable to work for the last two years because of intestinal cancer. He opened the door to the stairwell on the 12th floor the other day and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Drug addicts," he said, pointing to discarded plastic syringes on the concrete steps and to a bloodstain on the yellow stuccoed wall. "All North Africans," he said. "The police don't even care."

He paused as his next-door neighbor, a North African woman wearing a head covering, passed on the ***way*** to the graffiti-covered elevator. "She asked me to clear the addicts out of the stairwell this morning, but I refused," he said, "If I say anything to them they just call me a racist."

The French-owned stores on the ground floor of Mr. Hiestand's building have, one by one, been bought out by North African owners who cater to their clientele with signs in Arabic. One French butcher remains.

He borrows the butcher's car because Mr. Hiestand can no longer afford one of his own on a disability payment that leaves him a little more than $600 a month to support himself and his two school-age sons, Yann and Rick.

"It's not safe to ride the buses, and taxis won't even come in here after dark," he said. "It's like being a prisoner in your own country."

Mr. Hiestand blames French social-welfare and immigration policies for creating the situation, and he supports Mr. Le Pen's far-right movement. On the walls of his sparsely furnished three-room apartment he keeps a small arsenal of guns and knives and a collection of military memorabilia from his days as a paratrooper in Senegal.

In Aulnay, Mr. Le Pen won 20 percent of the vote, but he came in ahead of all other candidates in more than a score of cities from Marseilles to Metz, Colmar and Dreux on a platform promising to send three million of ***immigrants*** back where they came from to make room for three million unemployed French workers.

Such arguments may make little sense, but they appeal to racism. In fact, Islamic ***immigrants*** are among the hardest hit by France's 12.2 percent unemployment rate, with joblessness in many North African neighborhoods running at about 40 percent.

The British View

Harmony Depends On a ***Balanced*** Mix

Unemployment is just as big a problem in the Brick Lane neighborhood of the Tower Hamlets section of East London, once the center of the Cockney world. Today the street signs are in Bengali and English.

A total of 161,000 people live here, 37,000 of them -- 23 percent -- from Bangladesh, with a smattering of black African and Caribbean ***immigrants***. The rest, the English, tend to call all the other groups "blacks."

"I was born in the East End -- I live here because I belong here," said Eileen Whitmarsh, a 58-year-***old*** resident who lives 10 minutes from Brick Lane in a city housing project on Ellsworth Street. "I can't say we like what's going on now -- the indigenous people feel like second-class citizens," she said. "They feel as if the outsiders are getting preference."

Local city government is not permitted to build subsidized housing, she said, but makes public land available to private housing associations only if they promise to build plenty of five- and six-bedroom apartments.

"That is clearly for Asians," she said. "If there's a mosque to be built, someone always finds the money and the land for that, too."

Mrs. Whitmarsh works with Asian children in a school for the mentally handicapped, and says she has become friends with many Bengladeshi and Pakistani families.

"People are people," she said, "but now the English people who have lived here all their lives are being displaced by ***immigrants*** who are taking over."

Mr. Hastings, the Briton who grew up in India, came here 15 years ago and now lives in one of the buildings put up on land made available by the Tower Hamlets city council. A teacher-trainee, he works hard at getting the Asians and the English to live together.

"My eldest daughter has been going to a Church of England school with a mix of students," Mr. Hastings said. "But now she has to go to the next level and it's 95 percent Bengladeshi, and that is a problem. We've opted for a central London school that tends to be more mixed, but it means a 40-minute daily train ride each day for my daughter."

The anti-immigration British National Party has been accused of egging on skinheads in the area, who have clashed with Asian gangs. Early last year, with tensions running high, newspapers predicted that local government elections in May would produce strong majorities for the party, but it was defeated, even losing the majority it had held in the Millwall district.

An election to fill a vacancy in the Weavers ward of Tower Hamlets at the end of February confirmed the trend with a victory by the opposition Labor Party candidate, Mohammed Ali; David King, the British National Party candidate, won 16 percent.

"The people in this area have a long history of fighting racism," said Pola Manzilla Uddin, an emigre from Bangladesh who has been a Labor Party councilor in Tower Hamlets for six years.

"It's always been a neighborhood full of ***immigrants*** -- the Jews and the Irish came before us, but we have a different skin color, we stand out and we'll be here longer than those groups were," she said. "Our children are the ones who are going to determine whether we live in a racist society for the next 50 years, or live in a more ***balanced***, caring community."

Unemployment in Tower Hamlets last year ran close to 27 percent, two and a half times the national average. In Bradford, a manufacturing city 200 miles north of London, the jobless rate approaches 50 percent in some Pakistani neighborhoods, said Ralph Berry, a local councilor. There are 45,000 Pakistanis in the city, a ninth of the population.

Mr. Berry's living room, high on a hill in a mostly white neighborhood in Bradford's southwest, overlooks the Grange School, where 80 percent of the 1,000 students are Asian. "One child from this area goes to that school, which was built for it," he said.

The Grange school welcomes visitors with English, Urdu and Hindi greetings on the door, and its motto is "achieving together." Richard Thompson, the principal, said he saw his primary mission as preparing young Britons of whatever race or color for the society they live in now, not the one they came from.

"Some of my female students want to wear the veil, and they can if they feel they need to," he said. "I could stamp on it, but it isn't important. The important thing is for these British ***Muslims*** to be equipped with an education that allows them to live useful lives here," he said.

The German View

Far Right Fuels Fundamentalism

Two fundamentalist mosques, both in the predominantly Catholic, Rhineland city of Cologne, have been making headway in the Turkish Islamic population in Germany. The Turks have long been among the most secularized populations of the Islamic world.

The more radical of the two mosques, known by its Turkish initials I.C.C.B., runs an Islamic cultural and shopping center on the Niehler Kirchweg, a residential street in the Nippes section of Cologne.

A green Islamic flag flies above it, and on holidays the smell of barbecued lamb rises up to the fifth-floor apartment of Jurgen Kerstin and his wife, Regine, who live with their daughter in the building next door. Nippes is home to about 111,000 people, 12,000 of them Turks.

"We've always had Turkish neighbors, and we've always gotten along with them," Mrs. Kerstin said. "But these people are different -- the women always wear veils now, and they come on weekends to attend the Koran school."

In the Nippes city hall, Vural Emre, who came from Turkey 33 years ago to work in the Ford plant in Cologne and has since become a German citizen active in the Social Democratic Party, said he thought he knew why such movements had taken root.

Turks who had felt safe living in Germany suddenly felt dangerously exposed when right-wing German radicals, protesting a wave of foreign ***immigrants*** seeking asylum in Germany, began firebombing Turkish homes in late 1992, he said. More than 20 Turks and other foreign ***immigrants*** died in such attacks between then and the end of 1993.

The attacks declined after the German Parliament changed the Constitution in mid-1993 to make it harder to claim asylum. German far-right parties advocating the expulsion of foreigners failed at the polls in national elections last October.

But there are still problems, however petty.

Bernhard Henrici, the head of the Nippes district council, took a visitor up to his 15th-floor office, with a panoramic view from the Rhine to the Eifel hills to the west.

"Look around and try to count how many satellite dishes you see on the houses down below -- all of them are tuned to channels from Turkey," he said. Mr. Emre retorted, "Yes, and all of them had to sue their German landlords to get permission to put the dishes up."

The little three-story houses that Ford helped build to house him and the German workers at its plant in Nippes have since been neglected. Mr. Emre says the only German neighbors he has left on the Konigsbergerstrasse are widows like Maria Karbath.

Mrs. Karbath, 80, said she does not mind that the only grocery store in the neighborhood is run and staffed by Turks and carries Turkish staples.

"If I got sick and needed help, I know that I could call on any one of my neighbors and they'd take care of me," she said. "I'd rather depend on my Turkish friends than on the Germans."

Graphic

Photo: Yves Hiestand, a 48-year-***old*** accountant, lives in Aulnay-sous-Bois in a housing project occupied mostly by Algerian ***immigrants***. He complains the area is not safe: "It's like being a prisoner in your own country." (Gary Matoso/Contact Press Images, for The ***New*** York Times)

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