

## **Islam a part of Europe**

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Since the 2008 financial crisis, a right-wing populism preaching exclusivist nationalism has swept across Europe.

Far-right groups that once found themselves relegated to the fringes of European society have exploited the anxieties of the continent's most disenfranchised to demonise the outsider and popularise the politics of resentment. Utilising populist rhetoric, these once-derided movements have gained a firm foothold within mainstream politics.

Brexit and the inclusion of far-right candidates in the final run-offs of both the 2016 Austrian and 2017 French presidential elections stand as testament to the power of this populist wave.

Although the precise character of these far-right movements varies from country to country, all share a common (sometimes even defining) theme — a hatred of Islam.

For Europe's far-right, Islam is inherently alien, an acute existential threat that, like cancer, is slowly spreading from one European country to another.

Marine Le Pen, leader of France's far-right National Front, and recent French presidential election runner-up, has made it the cornerstone of her political career to halt "the progressive Islamisation of our country and the increase in political-religious demands (that) are calling into question the survival of our civilisation".

Likewise, The Netherlands' Geert Wilders, leader of the Freedom Party (PVV) that came second in this year's Dutch parliamentary elections, has called on the Quran to be banned while describing his movement as a "patriotic revolution", whose supporters are fighting "for the preservation of their people".

In the United Kingdom, similar rhetoric has emerged with the UK Independence Party (Ukip), members of which have described Islam as "evil" and a threat to national wellbeing.

The message is, therefore, clear. For some, Islam does not belong in Europe. Yet, even the most cursory study of European history will demonstrate precisely the opposite; Islam has been a fundamental part of Europe for at least 1,300 years, during which time it had contributed to both the richness and variety of European culture.

Islam first arrived in Europe in 711, when a Muslim army led by Tariq ibn Ziyad landed in Gibraltar. Within a year or so, Tariq defeated the Visigoth king, Don Rodrigo, at the Battle of Guadalete.

He then extended Muslim rule right across the Iberian Peninsula until, by 718, it had become an Umayyad province called al-Andalus.

In 756, the exiled Umayyad prince, Abd al-Rahman I (756-788), fled Damascus to al-Andalus and established the independent Emirate of Cordoba.

From that point on, al-Andalus became home to a distinctive, European-based Islam. Although Arab culture proved central to that identity, by the reign of Abd al-Rahman II (r.822-52), it had ceased to be a mere foreign imposition; conversions and mixed marriages had become commonplace, resulting in an eclectic blend of Middle Eastern and European cultural elements.

As European peoples began to convert to Islam, Islam became European. This situation persisted until 1492, when the Castilians destroyed the last Iberian Muslim kingdom and completed the Reconquista.

Nevertheless, in the wake of their victory, the Castilians found themselves ruling a substantial Muslim population. They called these Muslims the Moriscos.

Although quickly forced to (at least outwardly) convert to Christianity, with the majority eventually being expelled to North Africa, these Moriscos were the survivors of a European Muslim community that had been in existence for more than 700 years.

Although ultimately destined for extinction, these Iberian Muslims were representatives of a rich and thriving European Muslim society. But, just as Muslim rule was ending in Spain, on the other side of Europe, the Balkans were witnessing rapid Ottoman expansion and, ultimately, the creation of a new European Muslim identity.

In 1463, the Ottomans conquered the Orthodox Christian kingdom of Bosnia.

For almost a century, Bosnia had been in decline; harried by the Hungarians to the north and persecuted by the Catholic powers to the west, it had experienced a period of severe political instability and economic turmoil.

The Ottomans, however, pushed the Hungarian frontier far to the north and, being generally unconcerned with the doctrinal peculiarities of the Bosnian Bogomil brand of Orthodox Christianity, allowed the Bosnians to practise their religion undisturbed.

These factors brought much-needed political stability to the region, allowing new economic opportunities to develop.

As a consequence, the Bosnians began to look favourably upon their new Ottoman masters; by the end of the 15th century, official Ottoman records show a steady stream of conversions among Bosnian Christians.

By 1530, when a Catholic delegation from the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II passed through the Balkans on the way to Istanbul, Bosnia was already predominantly Muslim.

As a result, from the early 16th century onwards, a new Muslim identity evolved in Eastern Europe. First appearing in Bosnia, it later spread (with minor variations) to Albania, Kosovo and elsewhere.

As in al-Andalus, it saw indigenous Europeans adopt Islam and then merge it with elements of their pre-existing culture, forming a unique European Muslim identity, in this instance, termed Poturnak.

Former non-Muslim European cities like Sarajevo became centres of this new Islamicate culture. Indeed, they remain so even today long after the last Ottoman governor left the region in 1878.

(Islamicate refers to all forms of cultural expressions that show a clear influence of Islamic, Muslim traditions even though they originate from non-Muslims or outside Muslim communities).

This brief overview demonstrates Islam's longstanding relationship with Europe.

Far from being alien to the continent as modern-day far-right movements claim, Islam is a fundamental part of European history and identity. As new waves of Muslims continue to arrive in Europe from the Middle East and Africa, Europeans should remember that Islam is not something to be feared, but an integral part of their culture, too.

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