

American Foreign Policy Council



EUROPE

COUNTRIES

United Kingdom
France
Spain
Germany
Italy
The Netherlands
Denmark
Albania
Kosovo
Macedonia

Regional Summary

Buoyed by steady immigration from the Middle East and North Africa, as well as negative native demographics among continental states, the Muslim communities in Europe are becoming larger, more complex and more vocal. Within these communities, the past year saw Islamism continue to grow in strength as a political phenomenon.

The dominant mode of Islamist activism in Europe remains to operate within the parameters of existing political systems. Some groups, such as the Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations of Italy, confine themselves to expanding the participation of Muslims in national politics, while others, like the Muslim Association of Britain, work to promote Islamist political thought, as well as the message and appeal of foreign Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Only a small minority—exemplified by England’s al-Muhajiroon, among other fringe elements—has advocated violence against, and the overthrow of, European governments. Those elements are closely monitored and proscribed by the authorities in question.

Perhaps as a result of Islamism’s mostly-political expression in Europe, local governments generally have been slow to address or confront the phenomenon, and the national debate on the topic remains relatively unsophisticated

in places such as Italy and Spain. Further east, in the Balkans, the relative corruption and/or weakness of the Kosovar, Macedonian and Albanian governments similarly has allowed Islamist groups and more extreme interpretations of the Muslim religion to proliferate and gather strength.

Elsewhere on the Continent, however, signs of pushback against the encroachment of Islamist forces and values are increasingly visible. In France, after years of laissez faire attitudes toward the growth of political Islam, certain segments of the body politic are now demonstrating newfound emphasis on national identity and secularism as a reaction to Islamist influence. Denmark also has seen growing awareness of—and a hardening of attitudes toward—Islamist groups and individuals since the 2005 controversy surrounding publications of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad by the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. Likewise, in The Netherlands, there is growing attention to the “values gap” between the country’s indigenous population and its small, mostly immigrant, Muslim minority. Since the 2004 murder of controversial filmmaker Theo Van Gogh, there has also been a noticeable hardening of response to instances of Islamic radicalism throughout Denmark.

Beyond the general sphere of lawful Islamist activity in Europe, however, is the more ominous (albeit informal) one embodied by radical jihadist elements. Today, both Sunni and Shi’a terrorist groups, among them Lebanon’s Hezbollah militia and the Palestinian Hamas movement, boast a sizeable presence on the Continent (particularly in Germany and the United Kingdom). By and large, however, these organizations appear to prefer to use Europe as an area for staging, fundraising and recruitment, rather than seeing it as a target for operations.

Although European governments to date have been slow to address the political aspects of Islamism, there is considerable activism in the sphere of counterterrorism. A number of high-profile terrorist attacks in the past decade—for example, the March 11, 2004 Madrid train attacks and the subsequent July 7, 2005 London train bombing—resulted in a major focus on counterterrorism throughout the Eurozone. As a result, in recent years, authorities in multiple Europe countries have successfully apprehended and dismantled Islamist terrorist cells operating on their soil or against targets within their borders. Many of these groups and individuals have been connected to global terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. Some, however, have proven to be “home grown” or autonomous in nature.

This, in turn, has led to growing recognition of an alarming phenomenon associated with Islamism in Europe: the rise of spontaneous Islamist terrorism by individual radicals. During the mid-2000s, the U.S.-led war in Iraq served

as a major catalyst for this tendency among European Muslims, a sizeable number of whom traveled abroad to seek training for the purpose of fighting the Coalition in Iraq or targeting it in Europe and elsewhere. More recently, while the relative abatement of hostilities in Iraq has lessened its appeal as a destination for European jihadists, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan remains a call to arms for the small minority of radicalized European Muslims who decide to take up arms against the West.