

Why Muslims in Ireland should not be seen as outsiders

Our fast-growing Muslim population cannot be treated as one homogeneous group, writes Bryan Fanning



Ireland's Muslim communities were initially founded and led by medical students many decades ago. Many of the newly qualified doctors became permanent residents and set up the first mosques.

The first wave came from South Africa; these were the children of well-to-do Asians who fled apartheid and came to Ireland, following a deal brokered by Eamon de Valera, to study medicine. The most prominent of these, Moosajee Bhamjee, became Ireland's first Muslim TD in 1992. Two of his brothers also studied medicine in Dublin.

By 2002, the Republic's Muslim population numbered almost 20,000. Of these, around 2,000 were medical doctors, many from Middle Eastern and North African Arabic-speaking countries. The Muslim Brotherhood, an Arab nationalist and religious Islamic movement that began in Egypt during the 1920s, became an influential organisation among emigres in Europe and particularly amongst Arabic-speaking Muslims in Ireland.

The Dublin Islamic Society was founded at a time when thousands of members of the Brotherhood had been imprisoned by the Nasser regime in Egypt. Towards the end of the 1950s, many of its members sought political asylum abroad. Most went to other Muslim countries, some to the US and to European countries, but a few came to Ireland.

The Muslim Brotherhood became an important focal point for educated Muslims in Ireland and this elite sought to lead the wider Muslim community as it grew. The Muslim

Brotherhood became prominent during the Arab Spring in 2011. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi was elected president but later deposed by the military.

For several decades, our Muslim community was decidedly middle-class, different in profile from the Muslim communities in other European countries which attracted many poorly-educated post-colonial settlers (as in France) or guest workers (as in Germany). But by the turn of the century, this profile had begun to shift. Some newcomers were, like the earliest arrivals, medical students, doctors, nurses and other middle-class professionals. However, others arrived to fill comparatively poorly-paid jobs in service industries.

The 2006 census identified a total of 32,539 Muslims. Most were Sunni. About 2,000 were Shi'a.

These were found to have arrived from 42 countries; no longer were the majority from Arabic-speaking or Middle Eastern countries. Five years later, the Islamic community was just shy of 50,000. Muslims constituted just over 1pc of Ireland's population - the country's third largest faith group, after Catholics and the Church of Ireland. In the most recent census in 2016, over 63,000 people indicated Islam as their religion.

However, it does not make sense to refer to Ireland's Muslim community as a distinct cohesive entity. For all that Muslims of different backgrounds - Arabic or Urdu-speaking, Sunni or Shi'a - have bonded together in parts of Ireland, it is usually where they are too few to organise their own separate mosques or prayer rooms.

The Islamic concept of al-ummah-al-islamiyah in the Quran refers to a universal community of believers. It finds expression in the use of Arabic, in which the Quran was written. However not all Muslims speak or read Arabic, Urdu or Farsi - and English has emerged as the language spoken in the mosques.

Like the Irish in Britain in the 1970s, Muslims in Western countries have come to be treated as a suspect population. This has occurred to a much lesser degree here than in other EU countries. We, as yet, have no prominent anti-Islamic political movement, nor have we suffered any Isil-inspired terrorist incidents. Yet, concern that some Irish Muslims have become influenced by radical Islamic movements have been articulated by some Irish Muslim leaders. Such concerns were expressed by a few imams, most prominently by Sheikh Umar Al-Qadri, that Muslim leaders had not done enough to combat the radicalisation of some youths by extremist speakers who had visited Ireland - and by others whose teachings were accessed via the internet.

In 2015, Sheikh Al-Qadri criticised the Irish Council of Imams for not discussing extremism at its meetings, and called for less tolerance of extremism in mosques, warning that young Muslims were at risk of being radicalised on social media. During 2016 and 2017, in interviews following Islamic State-inspired terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels and London, Al-Qadri reiterated such warnings.

In November 2016, an Isil suicide bomber who died in Mosul in Iraq was identified as Terry 'Khalid' Kelly, a Dublin-born convert to Islam. Kelly apparently became radicalised while serving a jail sentence in Saudi Arabia and had lived in London before returning to Ireland in 2003.

Rachid Redouane, one of the three Tower Bridge attackers in London, had lived in Rathmines in Dublin and had an Irish wife. Redouane was of Moroccan-Libyan origin and had worked as a pastry chef. Redouane's Irish link was widely reported in the media.

On June 5, 2017, during evening prayers, rocks were thrown through the windows of the Ahmadi mosque in Galway in what was described in the media as a reprisal for the Tower Bridge attack. However, the mosque's imam, Ibrahim Noonan, had been one of the most vocal Irish Muslim opponents of Islamic extremism.

The visible presence of Muslims in Ireland has not become politicised to the extent that this has occurred in several other European countries. There are perhaps several reasons for this.

Until recently the Republic's Muslim community has been small and middle class, at a time when countries like France, the Netherlands and the UK included significant populations of poorly-educated and economically marginalised Muslims.

Secondly, Ireland has been less hostile to expressions of religion in public spaces compared to countries such as France, in which women and girls were prohibited from wearing the hijab in schools.

Our Constitution allows for denominational education. Most schools are Catholic, a smaller number are Protestant and a few are Jewish. Ireland's two primary schools with a Muslim ethos fit into this landscape. Like other denominational schools, they follow the national curriculum. Although Irish society has become more secular, respect for religion is still widespread. For all that, some Muslims, especially young women wearing headscarves, have experiences racism on the street or on public transport.

Some Muslims who came to Ireland as asylum seekers from countries like Somalia remain extremely marginalised. While most Muslims have integrated successfully, some are likely to see themselves as outsiders in Irish society.

The lessons from other European countries is these perceptions of exclusion cannot be allowed to fester.

Bryan Fanning is Professor of Migration and Social Policy at UCD and the author of *Migration and the Making of Ireland*, published by UCD Press