

**The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.**

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**Negotiating religious diversity
and Muslim identity in Greek urban spaces**

[draft: please do not quote without permission]

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Introduction

On 28 February 2010, a public prayer in Constitution Square, at the heart of Athens, sent a message for peace and love across the world and asked from God to help Greece overcome its escalating economic crisis. Public religious gatherings have not been that rare in Greece in recent years. However, February's event was unique in that it did not involve people pertaining to the majority Christian Orthodox faith, but to Islam. Even more so, the faithful participating in the prayer were not members of the indigenous Muslim minority, geographically and institutionally located at the region of Thrace in the north-east part of Greece (although several thousands internal migrants live in Athens), but were largely migrants from South Asian and Arabic countries. The occasion was the birthday of the Prophet on February 26, which was publicly celebrated two days later so that it falls on a Sunday¹. This was the fifth year such an event took place in the Greek capital and may be indicative of a transformation regarding the position of, and perceptions about Islam in the Greek public sphere and its relationship with recent immigration.

Another incident that took place some months earlier may be testimony that such a transformation is that is currently underway. On Friday 22 May 2009, the centre of Athens was shaken by angry demonstrations involving immigrant Muslims clashing with the police. The reason was a policeman's assault on the Koran during a routine documents inspection a few days earlier². This was the explosion in a series of cases of discrimination, police harassment and racist violence that affect many migrants and increasingly Muslims. Although the protests went on peacefully in the following days, supported by imams and migrant organisations who rejected violence, this may be seen as the first major migrant riot in Greece and concerned specifically Muslims. Ever since, the come into play of migrants in the Greek public sphere asserting public claims to the Greek polity and society involves increasingly a Muslim "component" and public debates over Islam in Greece tend to focus more on immigrant Muslims rather than the indigenous minority of Thrace. Moreover, such public debates are often triggered by developments in the ongoing discussions of building a Mosque in the Greek capital, or by open prayers on the occasion of important Islamic festivities, such as the Eid-al-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha, which – in the lack of an official site of worship - take place in the landmark locations of the urban public space.

This paper is based on an AHRC-funded project on *Islam in Greece: Religious identity and practice among indigenous and migrant Muslims* and will explore the case of Pakistani immigrants and indigenous Muslims in Athens. The study looks at the ways in which religious (Muslim) identity and practice are negotiated in a city where there is no official Mosque and where exclusionary perceptions of Islam are often an important element of Greek national identity.

¹ See e.g. *Eleftherotipia* newspaper, 01.03.2010 (report by G. Dama).

² See e.g. http://afroditealsalech.blogspot.com/2009/05/blog-post_24.html.

Background

Research on Muslims in Europe has highlighted the importance of three issues: the politics of recognising religious diversity, the tolerance (or not) of public claims to Muslim identity and whether governments allow the construction of mosques in European cities (Cesari 2005; Maréchal *et al.* 2003). After September 11th, March 11th and July 7th, these issues have become more prominent, closely linked to questions of immigrants' integration while also reflecting the global politics of terrorism (Modood *et al.* 2006). Islamophobia is often at the heart of the politics of recognition of Muslims in European public space and policy (Vertovec 2002). This has serious implications for the provision of services for Muslim communities and the subsequent conflicts that arise over the construction of Mosques. Such debates are influenced by the symbolic images these buildings have in the wider community (Eade 1996) and 'are illustrative of wider negotiations of cultural diversity' (Maussen 2005:30), religious expression and belonging (Gale and Naylor 2002). Moreover, discourses over EU enlargement, especially regarding Turkey, have stressed Christianity as a central element of European identity.

While Western European countries received the majority of their Muslim populations between 1950-1970, Southern Europe has recently emerged as an important destination for Muslim migrants, with new 'religious townscapes' changing the Christian physiognomy of its cities (Fonseca & Esteves 2002). Within the context of the Southern European shift towards immigration, Greece offers an interesting example where such "new cultural encounters" (King 2001) are manifested in unique ways. The majority of immigrants in Greece come from the neighbouring Balkans and the former Soviet Union. Albanians constitute more than half of the migrants but, partly due to historical peculiarities of Islam in Albania, they appear to be either largely non-practicing or converting to Orthodoxy also as a strategy to cope with discrimination and xenophobia (Hatziprokopiou 2006). More recent migrants from predominantly Muslim countries are employed in low-paid jobs and are often the victims of prejudice and discrimination (Antoniou 2003). Tracing the 'Muslim' population in official statistics is difficult and reveals methodological constraints (Brown 2000). The limited and marginally reliable Census data count them at about 7-8% of about 762,000 foreign nationals, the vast majority of them living in Athens. More recent estimates on their number in the capital vary between 120,000 to 200,000, but the picture should have changed substantially over the last two years with the sharp increases if undocumented transit and asylum migration through Greece's eastern borders, the majority of which originate from countries that are predominantly Muslim.

Some groups have established associations and the Pakistani community, who at 1.5% of the total 'foreign' population constitutes the largest group from a Muslim country, has recently been at the epicentre of public discourses and is the most visibly active in trying to secure places of worship, as Athens has no mosques or cemeteries for Muslims. After a long debate that revealed historically exclusionary perceptions of Islam in Greek national identity, the state recently agreed to the building of a mosque in the capital (Triandafyllidou & Gropas 2009). In the meantime, Muslims in Athens practiced their religion around self-organised places of worship, in private flats, basements or storerooms. In June 2007, an 'Arab Hellenic Centre for Culture and Civilisation' was launched, partly funded by a Saudi businessman's donation, including, for the first time, a formal prayer site.

Methodology and theoretical framework

The paper addresses the following questions:

- How do aspects of religious identity relate to the space of the city of Athens, e.g. with respect to images and symbols, places of worship or rituals?
- To what extent questions of belonging involve public expressions of Muslim identities, and how are these negotiated in the secular/Christian urban society of Athens?
- What are the political and institutional arrangements of ‘tolerance’ of Islamic identities and institutions in Greek urban settings?

The paper is based mainly on qualitative and ethnographic methods:

- interviews with individuals from the two groups under study
- interviews with representatives of community associations, religious organisations and mosques, governmental departments and the church
- non-participant observations, of sites of worship, prayers, public celebrations
- community and national press

Theoretically the paper is inspired by the notions of “everyday life” and the “right to the city” as developed by Henri Lefebvre (1991; 2007; see also deCerteau, 1984, on the former, and Harvey, 2008, on the latter). It builds on the concepts of “public” and “private” in relation to the space of the city. It explores the ways the respective social and cultural practices which may inscribe certain identities on specific places, and how these may be embedded on wider power relations.

Key Themes

1. The Athens Mosque debate and informal prayer sites:

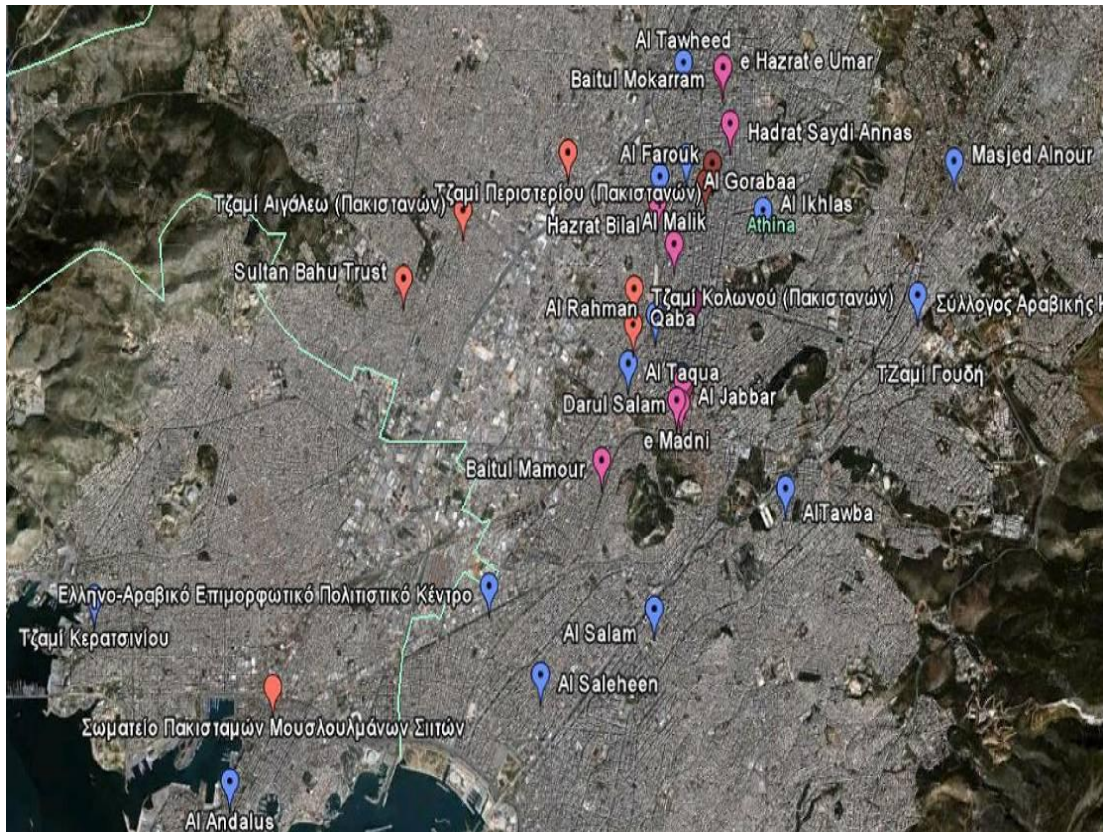
“The minority in Thrace has many problems but here in Athens the mosque is one of the most important ones... we would definitely visit it and use it as a central prayer site.” (Thracian in Athens)

“Leaving here in Athens I would like to have a proper mosque to visit. ...I still haven’t understood what the problem is and why Greek governments don’t want to make this mosque since there are official mosques in all European capitals. It would be good for the Muslims here... Now we have to use basements of buildings to pray.” (Thracian in Athens)

The Muslim world is not interested in building a mosque here in Greece, I believe this is an obligation of the Greek state to come to a final decision and finance its building... In Britain, France, Germany, Spain, there is a mosque,... is it that they can’t build a single mosque in Greece?...It is important to have a mosque built in Greece... once there is a mosque built in Athens the whole climate will change, contact will improve, there will be respect for Athens in the Muslim world...(Sudanese Imam)

What I see is that this is in the Constitution, every religion should have one... [But] Until this is built... There are many instances that they have been saying there will be a mosque... But we have not seen anything... I believe... in a few years there will be a Mosque... I believe that we need at least one very big mosque, so as to show the world here is Greek democracy, here is respect, we are civilized... (Pakistani migrant association)

2. Informal prayer sites: dispersal and concentrations



3. Informal prayer sites: inside/outside



4. Private vs Public: Friday prayer and Bairam (Eid) in central Athens



5. History and present, secular vs orthodox public space: The Monastiraki mosque as monument



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