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British Shift on Muslims Is Ominous

By JOHN VINOCUR FEB. 28, 2011

LONDON — When Maajid Nawaz is asked what message Britain's Muslims are finding in Prime Minister David Cameron's proclamation of the failure of state multiculturalism here, the answer isn't upbeat.

Mr. Nawaz is a British political scientist of Pakistani origin and former Islamist who founded the anti-extremist think tank Quilliam. His response comes with the authority of a man who changed his views on Islam as a political/religious imperative during four years in an Egyptian prison and who was a consultant in the preparation of Mr. Cameron's statement. Mr. Nawaz says:

“The Islamists are telling everyone what Cameron means is ‘change your religion.’ This is what Muslims are getting from the gatekeepers of their communities.”

That's a view suggesting Britain's Islamists will press for ignoring the government if it really does try to dismantle the multicultural status quo that Mr. Cameron says “encouraged different cultures to live separate lives” and “tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.”

The prime minister's speech Feb. 5 brought him into line with Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Nicolas Sarkozy's announcements of multiculturalism's demise — meaning, seemingly, that the accommodation of Muslim immigrants' particularities must end, replaced by their acceptance of the primacy of the laws, standards and cultural (but not religious) identity of the host country's majority.

Indeed, Mr. Cameron, with an eye on his electorate in the manner of his French and German counterparts, said that when “unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn’t white, we’ve been too cautious, frankly, even fearful, to stand up to them.”

But the British situation, in its European context, has been different over the years and remains more volatile. Sometimes self-willed, the segregation of its immigrant communities appears unique; the level of Islamic extremism is widely regarded as higher; and the advocacy of Muslim exceptionalism (such as the use of Shariah) is more mainstream, advocated by organizations like the Muslim Council of Britain.

Accounts of the heat and abrasions of a daily clash of cultures can be jarring.

A newspaper story tells of an urban primary school teacher who sprayed Bangladeshi children with air freshener because she said they smelled of curry. Another reports the rage of a judge, Lord Carlile, retiring from 10 years as the government’s overseer of counterterrorism strategy, who found university chancellors “weak” and reluctant to deal with Islamic extremists on campus. According to an Ipsos MORI poll, 70 percent of young people in their late teens and early 20s, usually thought to be the most flexible segment of the population, consider immigration to be a problem.

In a view from the European Continent, the Dutch sociologist Paul Scheffer, author of a new book, “Immigrant Nations,” describes Britain as the country, alongside Canada, where multiculturalism is most entrenched but where “radicalization is the most intense.”

And with ironic gloom, Olivier Roy, the French expert on the Middle East, in finding the opening of a “post-Islamist generation” in the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, writes that Islamism’s most radical international jihadists are now elsewhere: in the North African desert with Al Qaeda, in Pakistan, “or in the suburbs of London.”

To talk about how British multiculturalism might be modified, I went to the town of Rotherham in Yorkshire, where people of Pakistani backgrounds can make up as much as 10 percent of the parliamentary election districts.

Mahroof Husain, the borough councilor in charge of “community cohesion,” did not dodge the problem. As an attempt to deal with the alienation of the local white working-class residents, and their sense of being disadvantaged in relation to social services given immigrants, he told me of guiding funds their way that were originally meant to prevent Muslim radicalization.

At the same time, he acknowledged that “most of the Muslim community is apprehensive about confronting radicals. There’s an unresolved identity issue.”

For an explanation of this, I talked to Dr. Mohammed Hamid Husain, immigrant, physician, Rotherham notable and an officer of the Order of the British Empire. More True Brit, it would seem, you cannot get. Still, he said:

“I want to differentiate between integration and assimilation. I am all for integration. Assimilation means giving up everything.”

Denis MacShane, the Labour member of Parliament who represents many of Rotherham’s Muslims, said issues of confused identity among some of his constituents meant a mind-set that he called “semigration.”

In any event, Mr. Cameron’s stated solution for immigrants’ supposed missing allegiance and compatibility is “much more active, muscular liberalism” (definition left to the reader), which, in practical terms, looks mostly limited to what he defined as “shrewder” management of public money given to organizations “doing little to combat extremism.”

Like Mr. Sarkozy and Mrs. Merkel in their assertions of the death of multiculturalism — not disputed here — the prime minister has offered nothing of sufficient size and impact to fill its notional space and deal with the scale of the problem of Muslim immigration.

A groundbreaking, daring trade of an affirmative action program packed with jobs in exchange for a zero-tolerance regime combating all manifestations of parallel societies?

Not now, not here, no way.

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