In November 2006, the Muslim League of Poland co-organized a conference entitled “Integrating Muslims in Central-Eastern Europe.” The aim was to broadcast positive examples of social and cultural integration by Muslims, and to promote the concept of *Wasatiyya* (from *Ar. wasat*, middle), or what has become known as “Islamic Centrism.” Forged in response to interaction between Muslim countries and the West, the proponents of *Wasatiyya* seek to construct a positive European-Muslim identity. In so doing, they reconsider the relevance and application of Sharia to modern Muslim environments. 

Though Muslims from Russia, Arab countries, and Iran first arrived in Poland in the nineteenth century and subsequent waves of Arab, Iranian, and Afghani Muslims blended into Polish society during the 1970s and 80s, the country’s Muslim population only started to increase significantly from 1989, when the Soviet Union began to lose its grip on the surrounding provinces. While there is no official data, researchers and Muslim leaders estimate that there are now around twenty to thirty thousand Muslims in Poland. Some of the reasons why foreign Muslims come to Poland include: benefiting from business opportunities, studying, reconnecting with family, and escaping conflict in their own countries. The majority of Poland’s Muslims come from Arabic speaking countries: Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia. But Muslims from Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, post-Soviet states, and Africa (mainly Somalia) have also recently taken up residence in the country. Likewise, large numbers of Muslims have arrived from the North Caucasus as a result of the second Chechen war which started in 1999. (Indeed, over 80 percent of all refugees in Poland are currently Chechens.) From a different perspective, a growing number of ethnic Poles are converting to Islam. Among these are Orientalists, Arabists, artists, young people searching for spiritual meaning, and those embracing Islam to marry. Members of these groups tend to join such organizations as the Association of Muslim Students, and, since its establishment in 2001, the Muslim League in Poland.

The Tatar community

Islam in Poland is diversely expressed; there are even small Shiite and Ahmadiyya communities, though their influence is relatively insignificant. By far the most populous group, Sunni Muslims, is divided between two main sub-groups: the historically well-established Polish Tatars; and members of the aforementioned Muslim League. Poland’s “indigenous” Muslims, the Polish Tatars, have been living in Poland since the fourteenth century. They are often presented as a model example of successful integration. While undergoing profound acculturation – their social and economic situation does not differ from that of other ethnic Poles – they nevertheless manage to retain their Muslim faith. The Tatars emphasize their attachment to Poland and their contribution to its development. Many Tatars identify themselves as Poles of Tatar origin. Under the communist regime, a decline in Islamic practice and knowledge among the Tatars was observed, but nowadays a cultural and religious revival is taking place within the same circles. Before the outbreak of the WWII, Tatar leaders set up *muftiat* (Islamic councils) headed by a *mufti*, which provided for the imams’ education, and for the religious needs of the community. In 1925, the Muslim Religious Association was established; thereafter, the Tatars managed to pass the Act on the Relations between the Polish State and the Association. Because of their industriousness, those Muslims arriving in Poland during the last decades of the twentieth century found a well-organized Muslim community in good relations with the state.

The Muslim League

Poland’s Muslim population is comprised of two distinct communities: Polish Tatars and Muslim immigrants. Despite demographic and ethnic differences, the groups resemble one another in their insistence that Muslims in Poland are not impervious to assimilation and modernization. Through the approaches of *Euro-Islam*, as adopted by the Polish Tatars, and *Wasatiyya*, promoted by Muslim immigrants, these Muslims grapple to find a response to radicalism and to present a moderate face to their fellow Poles. It appears likely that many other Muslims are engaged, at some level, in their activities. Arabs seem to play a vital role among its active members. From an international perspective, the Muslim League pushes for the development of contacts with Western European Muslim organizations, such as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe. Most importantly, the Muslim League is the main proponent of *Wasatiyya*. Despite their success in Polish society, the newcomers have so far distanced themselves from the Tatars. This has led to an air of competition between the two groups. In 2004, the Muslim League gained the status of an Islamic religious association, a status previously limited to the Muslim Religious Association founded by the Tatars. In riposte, two months later, the Tatars appointed a young Tatar, Tomasz Miskiewicz, as Mufi of Poland.

Paradoxically, instead of trying to help each other out, the two comparatively moderate organizations now struggle for leadership over Poland’s Muslim communities. Both present an Islamic solution compatible with the values of liberal democracy to radicalism. Likewise, both groups make an effort to present Islam to Catholic Poles; and to combat the damaging stereotypes that have arisen since 2001. The Tatars emphasize their patriotism, referring to historical ties with Polish society. Conversely, the League’s newcomers prefer ideological arguments and the reinterpretation of Islamic concepts to argue their case. Tatar intellectuals such as *Michał Czeczot* describe the Tatar religious ideas as “*Euro-Islam*”; while Muslim League scholars, such as Samir Ismail, highlight the importance of *Wasatiyya*.

Thus, in different ways, both groups work at the same task.

The nature of the relationship between Tatar and non-Tatar Muslims is complex. Many members of the Tatar community, especially the younger generation, stress cultural differences between their group and the Arabs (the largest percentage of Muslim immigrants in Poland). The newcomers point to elements in the Tatar tradition that contradict “pure Islam” (*e.g.* the buying of Christmas trees) and criticize Tatars for their insufficient religious knowledge and lackadaisical habits in worship. Pressure from Arab activists has made some Tatars avoid further contacts. Aware of the risk of being marginalized, other Tatars see potential advantages to cooperation. Moreover, such relationships can contribute to a revival of religious feeling among Tatars. In Białystok, for instance, an important Muslim centre in northeastern Poland, incoming students from Muslim countries organize religious lessons and other activities for the Tatar youth.

Transforming Islamic traditions

The Tatars have managed to assimilate into Polish society while maintaining their Muslim identities. It has been a gradual process through which aspects of Muslim tradition have been Europeanized. The same process has been supported by privileges granted to Tatar communities, and eased by the key role played historically by Tatars in the Polish army. “Polish Islam” acquired many elements from Polish Christian culture. The Tatar understanding of Islam stresses similarities with Chris-


4. Ismail, Civilization.


Questions of interpretation

Characterized by attempts to form moderate western-Islamic forums and attitudes, the rise of the Wasatiyya movement marks the decline of Islamism. The leader of Poland’s Muslim League, drawing on Qaradawi’s concepts, defines Wasatiyya as a style that upholds main Islamic principles, while also permitting adaptation to modernity. The League claims that one of its aims is integration with wider Polish society, without sacrificing of Muslim identity. It therefore encourages its members to engage in positive cooperation with citizens of different religious backgrounds.

In terms of ‘aqidah (creed), the Wasatiyya relies not only on the Quran and Sunna, it also recommends “discernment in Sharia matters, independent of what is literally prescribed in Islamic scripture.” Indeed, a well-known imam in Poland, Abi Ali Issa, who heads the Muslim Religious and Cultural Centre in Wroclaw, has preached that it is the literal interpretation of the Quran, without due consideration of the ulama’s opinions, that has contributed to the stereotyping of Muslims and Islam.

In his opinion, classic terms in Islamic thought, such as dar al-islam (land of peace) and dar al-harb (land of war), can now properly be understood only in terms of safety. Thus, for instance, when there is a war going on, even a Muslim country may be classified as dar al-harb; while, as long as Muslims are still able to practice their religion, there should be no objection to regarding European countries as dar al-islam. Not surprisingly, the ongoing debate on these matters overlaps with another related debate on jihad; a concept which, Ali Abi Issa argues, may only be understood along defensive lines.

Muslim leaders in Poland, whether from the Tatar community or the Muslim League, universally praise the Sharia as superior to any human law code. At the same time, they accentuate such meanings and practices within the Sharia that may coexist comfortably alongside European values. Muslims linked to the League focus particularly on the moral connotations underpinning Islamic law. Values such as equality, nobility, and moral excellence are thus presented as intrinsically Islamic. In this way, moderate Islam is shown to oppose fundamentalist calls to rebel against the West.

The Tatar place similar emphasis on moral values embedded in the Sharia. Chazbijewicz speaks of a universal and liberal approach to the Sharia that is already widespread among members of his Tatar community. The League argues that the notions, norms, and ideas underpinning Islamic law exactly resemble those held by moderate Christian Poles. Both styles of approach in Poland, Wasatiyya (Muslim League) and Euro-Islam (Tatars) constitute alternatives to prevailing representations of the Muslim world as anti-western and incapable of modernization. Clearly, neither approach eradicates all economic, social, or cultural problems. Many Muslims, especially those who have just arrived in Poland, feel culturally alienated and consequently reject what they feel to be the West’s individualism and materialism. Nevertheless, as long as they can find suitable conditions in which to live, work, and worship in Polish society, moderate ideas will continue to flourish among the country’s Muslim communities.

Notes


4. Ismail, Civilization.
