

Discussion Paper: Why should Europe care about training imams?

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Executive summary

- It is imperative to establish a curriculum for Muslim religious leaders (imams and chaplains) in Europe, which could be made possible through the coordinated efforts of public authorities and relevant Muslim stakeholders.
- A consortium of European universities supported by the relevant ministries of higher education, the Erasmus+ programme and Muslim stakeholders is the optimal way forwards.
- A curriculum must be set to the highest academic standards, based on a secular approach to Divinalia grounded in the European critical self-reflexive approach and delivering degrees valuable on the labour market beyond the employment niche occupied by mosques.
- Academic expertise, a willingness to proceed and relevant projects are all available within Muslim communities.

Introduction & context

The inclusion of Islam and Muslim communities within European religious and societal landscapes has been an ongoing and multifaceted concern for most Western European societies following the increase of their Muslim populations since the 1960s. In this context, the role of Muslim religious leaders (imams and chaplains, in particular) in facilitating the adjustment of their co-religionists in matters of norms, values, ethics and behaviours has become a core issue. Indeed, several imams, due to their training in non-European contexts, have lacked the understanding or discernment to formulate relevant guidance, which has stirred public conversations on the importance of training imams in Europe. The series of terrorist operations over the last six years has further catalysed this debate. For example, the report of the Belgian parliamentary inquiry into the bombing¹ on 22 March 2016 and that of the European Parliament's Special Committee on Terrorism have also called for due attention to be focused on the importance of training imams in Europe.²

Interestingly, far from navigating uncharted territories, a number of academic reports have explored this issue in various national contexts,³ while there is also a breadth of practical experience available at the European level. As a result, there is the potential for the development and nurturing of new projects:

- In the Netherlands, three universities put in place imam-training programmes a decade ago, which have now been suspended.⁴ A renewed initiative is currently being explored, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Integration.⁵
- In Germany, the government has taken a voluntary and pragmatic approach since 2011 by supporting the development of Islamic theology programmes in up to seven German universities, with a budget of about € 44 million.⁶ Strikingly, these programmes tend to be similar to curricula developed in traditional Islamic institutions, such as Turkish faculties of theology, but have been transposed into the Western academic environment.⁷

1 Chambre des Représentants de Belgique, *Commission d'Enquête – Attentats terroristes 22 mars 2016, Résumé des travaux et recommandations*, Brussels, Chambre des Représentants, 2018 https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/attentats/Brochure_Attentats_Terroristes.pdf (consulted December 2021).

2 European Parliament, *Findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0512_EN.pdf (consulted December 2021).

3 To name but a few: HUSSON, J.-F., *Training Imams in Europe, the current status*, Brussels, King Baudouin Foundation, 2007; HUSSON, J.-F., MANDIN, J., MARTINIELLO, M., *Étude de faisabilité en vue de la création d'un Institut public d'études de l'islam (rapport final)*, Liège, CEDEM, 2014; EL-ASRI, F., *Les enjeux de la formation islamique en Europe francophone*, in *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses*, 36, 12/2015, pp. 79-105; BENZINE, R., MAYEUR-JAOUEN, Ch., PHILIP-GAY, M., *Mission de réflexion sur la formation des imams et des cadres religieux musulmans*, Paris, 2016; ASLAN, E., WINDISCH, Z. (eds), *The Training of Imams and Teachers of Islamic Education in Europe* (Wiener Islamstudien), Bern, Peter Lang, 2012; MESSNER, F., ABOU RAMADAN, M. (eds), *L'enseignement universitaire de la théologie musulmane, perspectives comparatives*, Paris, Cerf, 2018; VALDEMAR VINDING, N. & CHBIB, R. (eds.), *Education and Training of Muslim Religious Professionals in Europe and North America (International Report)*, AIWG-Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 2020.

4 GHALY, M., *Training Imams in Europe: The Challenges of Developing a Unified Program, Leiden University as a Study Case*, in *Journal of Islamic Religious Education and Theology*, (1)1, 2011, pp. 57-70.

5 BOENDER, W., *Professionalizing the Imam in Europe: Imam Training Programs as Sites of Deliberative Engagement*, in *Religions*, 12(5), 308, 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050308>).

6 VALDEMAR VINDING, N. & CHBIB, R. (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 20.

7 The University of Osnabrück proposes such an approach: https://www.irp-cms.uni-osnabrueck.de/studium/studiengaenge/islamische_religionspaedagogik_erweiterungsmaster_lehramt.html (consulted December 2021). The recent attempt to create pastoral training for imams has indeed been developed in collaboration with traditional Turkish institutions: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/11/22/islam-college-to-help-train-imams-in-germany> (consulted December 2021).

- In Southern Europe, the University of Sarajevo is building on the centuries-long Islamic tradition of Bosnia to promote its own Faculty of Islamic Studies as representative of an indigenous breed of European Islam.⁸
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- In France, 2020 saw the opening of the National School of Muslim Chaplaincy (Ecole Nationale de l'Aumônerie Musulmane, ENAM) in partnership with the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.¹⁰

Meanwhile, there has also been a range of community-based initiatives, including:

- L'Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines (IESH), based in France, in Château-Chinon and Paris.¹¹
- the Islamic University of Applied Sciences in Rotterdam.¹²
- the Islamic University of Amsterdam.¹³
- the Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicester.¹⁴
- the Islamic College in London.¹⁵

Most of these Islamic institutions have faced some of the following challenges:

1. Having aligned with a specific ideological background, difficulties have arisen when trying to reach beyond that ideological circle within Muslim communities. Such a position can also lead to suspicion from state authorities.
2. A difficulty in generating independent funding bases strong enough to grow and nurture establishments to allow them to compete with European higher education institutions without relying on external funding sources that often come with a number of strings attached.
3. A difficulty in getting academic recognition of curricula from European education authorities. This has led many of these institutions to establish partnerships with various traditional Islamic institutions (for example, Al-Azhar in Egypt or Ez-Zitouna in Tunisia) in order to provide the relevant degrees. However, such degrees are often not recognised by European public authorities.

8 See <http://upis.unsa.ba/en/ustanove/faculty-of-islamic-sciences> (consulted December 2021).

9 See <http://upis.unsa.ba/en/ustanove/faculty-of-islamic-sciences> (consulted December 2021).

10 See https://www.saphirnews.com/Avec-l-ENAM-le-recrutement-des-aumoniers-militaires-du-culte-musulman-se-professionnalise_a26818.html (consulted December 2021).

11 See <https://iesh.fr> (consulted December 2021). OUESALTI, F., *Islamic Education: seminaries and institutes: L'Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines, France*, in PETER, F. & ORTEGA, R. (eds.), *Islamic movements of Europe*, London, Tauris, 2014, pp. 291-3. On their link with the Muslim Brotherhood: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/qatari-charity-head-gives-millions-to-european-muslim-brotherhood-linked-bodies-1.880660> (consulted December 2021).

12 See <https://www.iur.nl/en/> (consulted December 2021).

13 See <https://i-ua.nl> (consulted December 2021).

14 See <https://www.mihe.ac.uk/> (consulted December 2021).

15 See <https://www.islamic-college.ac.uk> (consulted December 2021). This institute offers both academic training and traditional Hawza teaching, rooted in the Shia approach. This is a point of difference from the institutes name above, which are all rooted in Sunni Islam.

Mapping the complexity of demands for imam-training in Europe

There is a widely shared starting point: decision-makers are generally in favour of training Muslims born and bred in Europe as religious leaders. Such an approach would lead to three main outcomes:

1. *Fostering the inclusion of Muslims* as part and parcel of European societies, acknowledging that new generations of Muslims are fully part of the social, economic and cultural fabric. Islam has long been due the same consideration and benefits as other established religions.
2. *Responding to security concerns*, in particular the prevention of violent radicalisation, although numerous reports have demonstrated that violent radicalisation has not been taking place in mosques.¹⁶
3. *Mitigating the risk of potential diplomatic pressure from non-EU countries with large diasporas* (in particular Turkey, Morocco and Pakistan) that could (threaten to) stir up trouble through the mobilisation of those diasporas via religious channels.¹⁷

However, representative Muslim organisations, such as the Executive of Muslims in Belgium (Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique, EMB), the French Council of the Muslim Faith (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, CFCM) and the Institute of Communication between Muslims and the Government (Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid, CMO) in The Netherlands, have embraced only recently the issue of training imams in Europe.

This is largely due to the fact that they are run by large federations of mosques, which often maintain close ties with the countries of origin of their members. These federations share an understanding that they cannot support measures that would run counter to the direct interests of their countries of origin, for which the training and sending of imams to Europe remains an important means for leveraging influence. Indeed, it is only the organisation Muslims of France (which is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood) that has developed its own institution (IESH, see supra note 10), with the hope of training a generation of religious leaders who would not be loyal to any specific country of origin but to the organisation itself.

However, following Daesh attacks, pressure from various European governments, including those of France, Austria and Belgium, on Muslim representative organisations has increased, with repeated calls for them to contribute actively to the prevention of violent radicalisation through religious narratives. This has led to both a tightening of intra-community control of imams' discourses and an exploration of imam-training in Europe.

In parallel, Muslim countries are actively seeking a foothold on this emerging training market through two main channels:

1. By inviting European students to study in their countries, sometimes with a level of adjustment of their curricula and financial support. Typical examples of such endeavours include the Moroccan Institute Mohammed VI¹⁸ and Al-Azhar University, which recently opened a specific department for future European imams¹⁹ in partnership with the uni-

16 COOLSAET, R., *Radicalization: The Origins and Limits of a Contested Concept*, in FADIL, N., DE KONING, M. & RAGAZZI, F. (eds), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands, Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2019, pp. 29-51, p. 37.

17 BRUCE, B., *Governing Islam Abroad: Turkish and Moroccan Muslims in Western Europe* (The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy), Cham, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019, Chap. III.

18 See <https://www.fm6oa.org/fr/linstitut-mohammed-vi-pour-la-formation-des-imams-morchidines-et-morchidates-fiche-dinformation/> (consulted December 2021).

19 See <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/egypt-international-academy-imams-religion-discourse.html> (consulted December 2021).

versity of Medina, which has for decades run its own set of programmes for European students. Morocco has been particularly active diplomatically, selling its institute as the perfect solution for European states and seeking to cast in a positive light its form of “neo-Malikism”, which is supposedly fit for secular societies. However, the discourse of some of the first certified religious leaders from this institute now operating in, for example, France is raising a number of concerns when it comes to the accommodation of Islam in Europe: so far it resembles yet another shade of grey on the spectrum of Salafi conservatism, draped in the formalism of the traditional Maliki *fiqh*.²⁰

2. By seeking to develop their own training institutes in Europe, potentially as branches of existing institutions (for example, the Turkish Diyânet, which has strived to develop its own campus in Strasbourg with a separate faculty of theology²¹ and even non-academic training centres²²). This approach anticipates future potential prohibitions on sending “consular imams”²³ to European countries by training them directly “on site” according to the Muslim country’s own principles and methodologies with a view to ensuring the loyalty of European-born imams and their understanding of the vested interests of the said country.

Finally, there is very little information available about the interest of broader European Muslim communities on the issue of imam-training in Europe. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there should be a level of dissatisfaction, in particular among younger generations, about imams brought in from abroad. This is because, due to linguistic and cultural gaps and misunderstandings, it is not easy to have constructive exchanges with these imams on complex and/or intimate questions, let alone to ask for spiritual guidance in diverse and highly secularised societies.

In any case, there seems to be a consensus among Muslim representative organisations, Muslim countries of origin and even European Muslims that European states should not intervene directly in training Muslim religious leaders. The argument for the separation of Church and State rings loud and clear in this regard, though it is difficult not to notice some sort of double standard when this argument is presented by Muslim countries of origin, which are directly involved in the organising of imam-training in their own national remit for purposes similar to those put forward by European states: security, prevention of radicalisation, cultural and societal cohesion, and so on.

20 See, for example, the production of Ismail al-Roubayçi: <https://www.facebook.com/abu.alqasabayn> (consulted December 2021).

21 See <https://t24.com.tr/haber/marmara-universitesi-fransada-ilahiyat-fakultesi-acacak,714428> (consulted December 2021).

22 See <https://www.rundschau-online.de/region/kreis-euskirchen/alte-jugendherberge-baasem-neues-ditib-ausbildungszentrum-oeffnet-am-donnerstag-33707826> (consulted May 2020).

23 See https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/02/01/le-double-pari-de-macron-sur-l-islam-consulaire_6068326_3232.html (consulted December 2021).

Prospective European Muslim socio-demographics and their impact on the imamate

A number of the reasons for reluctance towards investing in imam-training are grounded in the current state of European Muslim communities and do not take into account the emerging landscape of Muslim communities over the next fifteen years. However, that landscape will be the setting in which imams eventually trained in Europe will operate, especially when the time needed to put in place the relevant curricula and to award degrees is taken into account.

Briefly, the lack of decent remuneration for imams has been a deterrent for new vocations in most countries but is likely not to be the case within a decade. It is no surprise that young Europeans considering becoming imams wish to receive a reasonable salary that can cater for raising a family and to benefit from legal holidays and a pension. They will never accept the challenging working conditions of most of the previous and current generations of imams. Fortunately, within the next decade or so, it is expected that Muslim communities will reach agreements to access dedicated tax revenue,²⁴ such as in Germany, or to generate their own stable funding streams, such as in France,²⁵ solving the current lack of resources to cater for their pay needs. Moreover, the generation of mosque leaders currently on the rise understands that the right price needs to be paid to get the required set of competences and that being an imam or chaplain is a full-time job that deserves to be valued accordingly.

In addition to this, this new mosque leadership has been educated in societies where the representations of religious leaders have been moulded around the figures of the priest and the pastor. As a consequence, the perception of the role of imams and chaplains is already largely aligned to this model rather than to that of imams as just the people “who pray in front of others”. This shift implies an expectation of professionalism and high-quality education, specifically so that they may provide spiritual guidance in the complex world with which they are familiar.

Within the next decade or so, it is also expected that the growing need for religious and spiritual guidance in line with the European societal context will catalyse an increased demand for female imams and chaplains. Women have an even higher stake in accessing the pulpit and contributing to reframing the mainstream Islamic narrative. It is not unlikely that female religious leaders will play a decisive role in compensating for potentially dwindling male interest in the religious professions if the material conditions of the imamate and chaplaincy do not improve as significantly as envisaged above.

24 See <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-mulls-introducing-mosque-tax-for-muslims/a-46866041> (consulted December 2021).

25 See https://www.saphirnews.com/L-AMIF-une-structure-qui-veut-se-positionner-comme-un-pilier-de-l-islam-de-France_a25935.html (consulted December 2021).

Re-assessing the role of future imams

Scaling up their profile to respond to emerging needs

Traditionally, an imam does not hold a specific function requiring a particular set of skills or a special knowledge base: the role is simply to guide collective prayer and any Muslim mastering at least some sūras of the Quran is entitled to lead collective prayer. However, throughout history, an imam's function has in fact been specified, with different roles, such as delivering the Friday sermon or leading the daily prayers or the call to prayer, requiring differing levels of knowledge. In large cities and prestigious mosques, imams were historically expected to be scholars, as it was understood that the spiritual leadership of a congregation required more than the thorough knowledge of a few verses.

In diasporas, in particular in Europe, there is a broad spectrum of imam profiles. Some are extremely well trained, holding various university degrees from prestigious European or non-EU Muslim universities; some have been trained according to the traditional transmission of Islamic knowledge (known as study circles); some have been trained in traditional non-academic institutions; some are self-made imams, having acquired their knowledge through practice and self-education; others are laymen who accept the responsibility to lead prayer as a religious duty. This generates large disparities in terms of quality of spiritual guidance. On top of this, the material conditions of these imams also have an impact on their individual capacity to fulfil a leadership role for their congregations.

Taking stock of the current and prospective situations of European Muslims, the function of imam in Europe has to be professionalised and scaled up, similar to the function of priests and rabbis. For first-generation Muslim immigrants, the mosque resembled Proust's madeleines: it was a cultural-religious space with a flavour of "home" that broke up the hardship of a working life in exile. As such, these people were satisfied with imams who would speak "like at home" and would not challenge their worldview directly. Later generations of Muslims, however, are deeply embedded in their European societies and cultures, which devote increasing attention to personal growth, including spiritual and emotional well-being and, most importantly, personal freedom and a deepening circumspection towards (religious) dogmatism.

In such an environment, imams will increasingly be expected not to be mere providers of one-size-fits-all religious recipes, but spiritual advisers able to support their congregants individually towards their own personal epiphanies, accompanying them on their own spiritual journeys. This represents a major epistemic shift for the mainstream Islamic leadership, which has been more used to gatekeeping against individual *ijtihād* (a personal effort taken to interpret religious texts) and consequently has become a powerful instrument of conformism and standardisation of Islamic thought and deed.

Imams at an academic level and the emerging knowledge base

This emerging role for imams requires a high-level, high-quality academic training that would equip them with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate traditional Islamic heritage in its depth and breadth through a historical-critical perspective, which is an integral part of the European academic knowledge base. Such a training would also provide them with tools from the human sciences necessary to process the complexities of European secular societies, in all their legal, sociological, anthropological and cultural aspects.

Further, contrary to Muslim-majority countries, which are still much more homogeneous in terms of theology, jurisprudence, linguistics and imagination, any single European Muslim congregation is already a melting-pot of the diversity of Muslims worldwide. Many imams today face

congregations with Sunni and Shia members, born-again Muslims and believers on exit paths, heterosexuals and homosexuals, people with Jewish, Christian, atheist and you-name-it close family members and friends, and so on. An imam from abroad, even with the highest quality education, has never been trained to be able to handle being confronted by such diversity. As a consequence, future European imams will require a robust training so as to be able to converse peacefully and respectfully with Muslims from across the broadest spectrum of positionings and life stories, including some whom they might personally consider to be “problematic” from their own vantage point. This will further require developing their skills in matters of decentring and care, in dimensions that are very specific to the European context.

An academic curriculum aiming at answering these specific demands would require shifting substantially the way “Islamic knowledge” (*al-‘ulûm al-islâmiyya*) is approached, at least by incorporating:

- European academic standards, grounded in the principles of methodological doubt, refutability, reflexivity and critical approaches.
- A secular takes on theology through the mobilisation of scientific disciplines, such as historical anthropology, history of institutions and imaginations, philology and diachronic linguistics, semiology and theories of communication, critical history of the formation of Islam, of Muslim elites, and so on.

The aim is not to demean believers or to annihilate their faith, but to equip future imams with a decentred and analytical approach that has the potential to help them to refine their knowledge and understanding of their own tradition and, most importantly, to discover in a critical way the richness of the Islamic heritage and its internal debates, the vibrant polyphony of a religious tradition too often considered, including by many of its followers, as univocal.

Advisably, the epistemic approach of such a curriculum will have to be given serious consideration. At the very least, the following three assumptions will have to be reckoned with:

1. The critical human and social sciences approach towards religious topics is not antithetical to the acquisition of skills and knowledge by religious leaders who aim to take spiritual care of any specific religious community, including a Muslim one. A “critical introduction to the history of the doctrines of Sufism,” for example, should provide the learner with a robust analysis of the evolution and articulation of the fundamental tenets of mystical doctrines in Islam. Any imam mastering this subject will have enough information to avoid disparaging statements about Sufism and to relate to congregants set on Sufi paths, even if they are not Sufi themselves, while being in a position to communicate those tenets to non-Muslim audiences.
2. The critical and analytical confrontation of future Muslim religious leaders with the historical plurality of Islamic schools of thoughts is a tool in itself to foster their openness to the plurality of meanings intrinsic to European secularised societies of which they are part and parcel, as well as to European Muslim communities and congregations.
3. An academic approach to imam-training cannot have as an objective the breeding of a generation of progressive imams and religious leaders. However, it should be grounded in a truly liberal approach to knowledge and personal growth (in the philosophical sense of the term, as deployed by Isaiah Berlin²⁶). Taking stock of the fact that humanity is thoroughly diverse and that some needs have anthropological dimensions (order, structure, liberty, creativity, care, flexibility and so on), academic training should not aim to manufacture or unduly influence the religious and philosophical beliefs of trainees. Yet such training has a duty to equip trainees with the necessary intellectual tools to make informed choices about their own lives and to prepare them, through reflection and decentring, to support congregants to make their own informed choices as well, even if these contradict their own.

26 AUDARD, C., *Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme? Éthique, politique, société* (Folio Essais Inédit), Paris, Gallimard, 2009, pp. 362-4.

The added value of a concerted approach at the EU level

The European dimension of such a project imposes itself quite naturally as a space for mutual learning and the pooling of resources, at least with regard to two aspects:

- a) *Economies of scale*: in an age of scarcity for this kind of niche project (there are only a few thousand imams operating in Europe), it is unlikely that any stakeholder would have the resources to invest millions of euros in the long run to build from scratch and maintain a prestigious academic institution in the style of, for instance, the Catholic Institute of Paris.²⁷ Crowdfunding is not an option for this type of project.

Therefore, an elegant but complex solution would be to pool existing human and financial resources between universities based in various European countries to form a European campus for Islamic studies.²⁸ Students would receive a joint degree from the partner universities; their travel and accommodation cost, as well as that of the teaching staff, would be largely taken care of by the Erasmus+ programme. By doing so, the financial implications of such a programme would be limited. The result would be the creation of only a limited number of courses, which would be supervised by the relevant educational authorities. On these courses, a very limited number of modules that are non-secular, such as Quran recitation and pastoral care, would have to be provided by other stakeholders and would, as such, not be part of the formal academic curriculum. These modules would remain optional for those who really wish to undertake a professional career as an imam or chaplain. The formal academic curriculum should be open to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, without regard to sex or gender identification.

- b) *Human resources and legitimacy*: only a European transnational initiative will be able to gather the breadth of expertise needed to train future European imams on all the specifics of Islam, from the various schools within Sunnism to Ahmadiyya, passing by the Khâridjî theology and Isma'îlî metaphysics. In Europe, there are some world-class academics in the field of Islamic studies, including among them a growing number of academics with various Muslim backgrounds who have mastered both the religious tradition and scientific methodologies. Although a training project should not be based solely around such European Muslim academic profiles, it will nonetheless benefit from their involvement, as they bring with them legitimacy in their communities for their knowledge of the tradition and in academic circles for the high quality of their work. As such, they will play a crucial role (a) in facilitating the intra-community legitimisation of the curriculum and (b) in embodying the individual negotiation between the intellectual and ethical exigencies of human and social sciences and the religious or spiritual affiliation rooted in an age-old tradition, therefore positioning them perfectly as role models for students.

²⁷ See <https://www.icp.fr> (consulted December 2021).

²⁸ See https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en (consulted December 2021).

Conclusion

Organising the training of Muslim religious leaders in Europe, tailored to the current and emerging needs of European Muslim populations, is required and indeed possible through a concerted effort between relevant stakeholders working in close collaboration: Muslim groups with relevant expertise and projects, European universities, ministries of higher education and EU support by means of the Erasmus+ programme.

The training of Muslim religious leaders in Europe is only one element, albeit of central importance, among the tools required to support European Muslims towards equality within European societies. Such training will be achieved by anchoring the formation of Muslim religious leaders and their study of theology in a secular approach that draws on the core of European episteme, characterised by critical thinking, self-reflection, refutability and the principles of human rights. This approach will articulate various legitimate understandings and perspectives of Islam's rich heritage. It will therefore foster the capacities of future imams to navigate and draw upon the most interesting features of the immense diversity of Islamic tradition and European societies, with a view to offering their congregants relevant spiritual guidance and care, a sense of ownership of their place in European societies and an ethos nurturing responsible engagement and respect for all, as well as repudiating radicalisation leading to violence.

Recommendations and ways forward

For project developers:

- a) Create a curriculum and training project fit for the future needs for imams in Europe, including allowing for a few thousand imams to be trained in the coming decades.
- b) Establish a consortium between European universities and Muslim stakeholders to develop a joint curriculum able to attain the highest academic standards and to gather the best European academic expertise in the field of Islamic studies, while also qualifying for access to Erasmus+ funding to enable the mobility of teachers and students.
- c) Establish firmly the epistemic foundation of such a programme to respond to the current and emerging needs for spiritual guidance and care among European Muslim communities that are increasingly deeply secularised. Explore the potential of a secular approach to theology grounded in human and social sciences.
- d) Ensure that the curriculum is delivered by a substantial percentage of Muslim academics from all backgrounds to safeguard its legitimacy, its endorsement by Muslim representative bodies and its modelling function for future Muslim religious leaders.
- e) Ensure that it is financially supported by European funds, including public funding, and not by funds coming from non-EU countries with vested interests in the training of imams.

For Muslim representative bodies:

- a) Support emerging initiatives for the training of imams without seeking to control them. No initiative will garner a complete consensus on its objectives and methodologies due to the immense diversity intrinsic to Muslim communities in Europe and their competing interests. Aim to keep abreast of and to feedback constructively on the development of such a project.
- b) Recognise the validity of the envisaged project's curriculum, where relevant, and encourage young European Muslims aiming to become religious leaders to join it by prioritising their laureates for access to the imamate in Europe and to appropriate material resources.
- c) Support the professionalisation of the imamate in Europe by contributing to the development of standards to access the profession (which include degrees acquired through such new curricula) and to the creation of financial resources that will cater for promoting the professions of imam and chaplain.

For decision-makers:

- a) Establish a working group with interested countries under the patronage of the council and/or the European community at large to garner support, turn the needs into realisable objectives and maximise the potential for collaboration and the exchange of good practice. Such a working group should draw, at the very least, on experts from home affairs, justice and higher education departments, as well as the Erasmus+ programme, and relevant Muslim stakeholders.
- b) Consult with relevant Muslim and non-Muslim European civil society stakeholders involved in the training of imams (academics, experts, practitioners, relevant foundations, and academic institutions).
- c) Allocate a specific budget that would cater for the following objectives:

- Support academic research on issues linked to the development of imam-training in Europe (such as changing demographics in mosques, the expectations of young European Muslims with regard to their spiritual leadership, the level of interest about the profession of imam among the European Muslim youth and the future demand for imams in Europe).
- Provide seed funding (via grants) for European initiatives to develop curricula jointly with academic institutions and/or for universities to explore the possibility of setting up a joint curriculum centred on a secular approach to Islamic theology in close collaboration with Muslim experts that keeps Muslim representative organisations in the loop.

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