



The Politics of Islam in Europe and North America

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Islamic Deathscapes of Germany

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Anxieties about the place of Islam and Muslims in Europe underpin a wide range of contemporary debates over the meaning of secularism, democracy, citizenship, and national identity. Politicians and pundits across the political spectrum question whether Islam is compatible with European values and ways of life. Such discussions often focus on the visibility of Islamic signs and symbols in the public sphere. Although Muslim presence in Europe has been evident in urban landscapes for decades, the public visibility of Islam, as Nilüfer Göle argues, “disturbs the collective imaginary of European countries shaped by the secular values of freedom and a non-religious way of life.”¹

In attempting to understand why Islamic symbols have provoked backlash in various European countries, scholars have often focused on conflicts involving female headscarves or the construction of mosques. In this memo, I’d like to draw attention to a somewhat neglected site of public Islam that is, nonetheless, highly consequential for European Muslims: the cemetery. My discussion grows out of my current book project, *Dying Abroad*, which examines how death structures political membership and identity among Muslim communities and ethno-religious minorities in Europe. In the book, I argue that families, religious communities, and states all have a vested interest in the fate of dead bodies and endeavor to show how in contexts where the boundaries of the nation and its members are contested, burial decisions are political decisions that are linked to larger struggles over the meaning of home and homeland. My findings are based

on extensive fieldwork carried out in Berlin and Istanbul, during which I conducted interviews and participant observation with Muslim undertakers and Islamic funeral homes, bereaved families, government officials, religious leaders, and representatives of funeral aid societies.

With the long-term settlement of Muslim communities in Europe, there is a growing demand for local burial spaces where families can inter their dead in accordance with Islamic laws and traditions. In many European countries, including Germany, Muslims face a number of challenges with respect to the viability of Islamic burial, including the limited availability of Islamic cemetery sections, laws prohibiting coffinless burial, and mandatory (sometimes lengthy) waiting periods between death and interment. In the limited space that I have here, I’d like to offer some tentative thoughts on one specific dimension of Germany’s Islamic deathscapes—namely, the patterns of memorialization and the representation of ethnic, religious, and national identities on the tombstones of Muslim graves in Berlin’s Islamic burial grounds.² Such graves are still a relatively rare sight in Germany (only 250 of the approximately 32,000 public cemeteries in the country have sections reserved for Muslims), yet they are, nonetheless, suffused with deep cultural and symbolic meaning. Generally speaking, cemeteries are exemplary sites of public memorialization where struggles over memory and collective identity occur.³ As places where the physical landscape is symbolically (re)inscribed and (re)signified, Germany’s Islamic cemeteries offer insight into the

¹ Nilüfer Göle. *The Daily Lives of Muslims*. London: Zed Books, 2017. Pg. 1. See also Avi Astor and Sultan Tepe (this volume).

² Elsewhere I have explored conflicts around local burial laws and Islamic rituals and the different reasons why families decide to inter their dead in Germany or repatriate to their countries of origin for burial, the intermediary role played by Muslim undertakers between immigrant families and the state, and the ways in which Islamic funeral funds incentivize repatriation over local burial. See Osman Balkan. “Burial and Belonging.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. Vol. 15. No. 1, 2015; *Ibid*. “Between Civil Society and the State: Bureaucratic Competence and Cultural Mediation among Muslim Undertakers in Berlin.” *Journal of Intercultural Studies*. Vol. 37, No. 2, 2016. *Ibid*. “Till Death do us DEPART: Repatriation, Burial, and the Necropolitical Work of Turkish Funeral Funds in Germany.” *Muslims in the UK and Europe*. Ed. Yasir Suleiman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

³ Recall that the Nazis invested much energy into purging what they perceived to be foreign elements and racial outsiders from “German” cemeteries. The process of Aryanization and “purification” entailed, first, the systemic exclusion of Jewish communities from the right to burial in municipal cemeteries, and later, the destruction of Jewish burial grounds throughout the country. See Monica Black. *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

changing contours of political membership, belonging, and identity in an increasingly multicultural society. Moreover, they are sites where members of ethno-religious minorities assert and display their long-term communal presence and in the process, help normalize symbols of ethnic, religious, linguistic diversity in contemporary Germany.



Figure 1: Multilingual sign marking the Muslim burial section of Landschaftsfriedhof Gatow, Berlin, Germany

Writing and Seeing the Dead

As an amalgamation of person, place, text, image, and name, the grave is a particularly dense semiotic object. “While they are endpoints for migrants,” writes Engseng Ho, “[Graves] are beginnings for their descendants, marking the truth of their presence in a land.”⁴ My reading of Islamic tombstones focuses on three dimensions: the texts and images they contain, as well as the built features of the stone itself. Of the approximately two hundred tombstones surveyed, I found that the majority of textual inscriptions are monolingual and that Islamic referents are fairly prevalent. Furthermore, the stones display a range of symbols such as flags and crescent moons that place the deceased within broader ethnic, religious, or national

collectivities. In some cases, the design of the stone itself mimics Islamic architectural styles. Through the choice of language, epitaph, symbolic imagery, and gravestone design, the living commemorate the dead and assert their membership in a variety of overlapping communities.

The graves of Berlin contain a multitude of different messages written in a myriad of languages including Arabic, Bosnian, Farsi, German, English, and Turkish. They are often addressed to the deceased herself but in many cases, speak directly to the living, inciting them to action. The most common appeal is for prayer. Variations on the phrase “Ruhuna Fatiha,”⁵ including “al Fatiha,” “al Fateha,” “el Fatiha,” or simply “R. Fatiha” or “Fatiha” were present on approximately one third of the tombstones, on the graves of the old and young alike (see figure 2).

Injunctions on tombstones for passers-by to pray for the soul of the deceased are not unique to Islam nor to the contemporary period.⁶ Such communicative acts create potentials for signification by delimiting a community of mourners and believers. The act of writing “Fatiha” on a tombstone marks the individual deceased as a Muslim but also situates her within a broader collective Islamic community by instigating communicative action between the deceased and other members of the community of faith. It signals the existence of a Muslim identity while simultaneously entreating other Muslims to profess their own Islamic identity through ritualistic acts of prayer. By acknowledging the deceased as a Muslim and by praying for the souls of all Muslims, the observant visitor reflexively produces the wider Islamic community through pious symbolic action.

Beyond references to religious beliefs and identities, the graves of Muslims in Berlin also contain secular histories in the form of epitaphs. The vast majority of the written

⁴ Engseng Ho. *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2006. Pg. 3.

⁵ The Turkish phrase “Ruhuna Fatiha,” translates to “Fatiha for his/her soul.” It refers to the *Sura al-Fatiha*, the opening chapter of the *Qur’an*, which is a central part of Islamic worship and an obligatory part of the daily prayers.

⁶ The practice dates back to Ancient Rome and is famously captured along the Appian Way. Roman Law required that the dead be buried outside human settlements and entering the city entailed passing through a community of the dead. Tombs called out to passers-by, asking them to stop, reflect, and remember with injunctions such as: “You are human, stop and contemplate my tomb, young man, in order to know what you will be. I did no wrong. I performed many duties. Live well, for soon this will come to you.”

text on these grave markers is not in German. Of the tombs surveyed, 77 percent have monolingual inscriptions in Turkish, Arabic, or Bosnian. The remaining 23 percent incorporate text in two or more languages, including German. Although multilingual messages are present in some of the earliest graves surveyed here (from the 1990s), they are more numerous from the 2000s forward, reflecting a trend towards linguistic syncretism (see figure 3). Biographical information is conveyed through short inscriptions that contain a family's genealogy, kinship terminology, places of birth and origin, and occasionally information about the deceased's occupation, hobbies, or interests. Often these texts are paired with images and icons.



Figure 2 ("R. Fatiha") and Figure 3 ("Maroc / Berlin")

Invoking the country of origin by referencing the place of birth not only offers biographical information, but simultaneously concretizes and makes explicit a migratory history (see figure 3). Although this tradition exists among "native born" Germans, it is usually to convey the fact that the deceased was born in another part of the country. In the Muslim sections of Berlin's cemeteries, the practice is largely restricted to people who were born abroad. The decision to reference the country of birth makes clear that certain families seek to honor their ancestral roots and migratory routes. It also acknowledges the fact that the deceased is not buried in their natal soil, a practice that is still very common among first generation migrants.

Approximately 75 percent of the graves surveyed bore images, a practice that is less common in Muslim majority

countries. These visual markers can be classified into three categories: national or patriotic symbols, religious motifs, and personal portraits. While compiling this archive, I was struck by the existence of flags on the tombstones of civilians, a practice that is often reserved for soldier dead. The flag is a recognizable visual marker that has the potential to reach a wider audience than an epitaph or inscription, particularly if the text is written in a language that is foreign to the observer. It is a powerful symbol of national belonging and conveys a range of emotional attachments to a political community.

Among the different nationalities represented within Berlin's Islamic burial sections, the Turkish flag appears far more frequently than others. While only 10 percent of the tombstones surveyed included flags, 90 percent of these were Turkish flags (see figures 4 and 5). One could read this as a sign of greater (real or aspirational) nationalist sentiment among Berlin's Turkish population or as a strategy used by Turkish Muslims to distinguish themselves from other national groups. Skeptics might argue that the existence of a Turkish flag in a German cemetery evinces a lack of integration or assimilation to the dominant culture. Yet, there is a certain ambivalence at play, given that the deceased is buried in Germany and hasn't been repatriated to Turkey for burial. While the flag might be Turkish, the body remains in Germany and serves as an anchor and reference point for future generations. Like the practice of marking a foreign birthplace, the flag simultaneously acknowledges a migratory history and the reality of the community's presence in a new land.



Figures 4 and 5: Graves featuring Turkish Flags and Islamic referents. Note that the grave on the right is for a two-month old baby.

Finally, one of the most visually striking features of Berlin's Islamic cemeteries are tombstones resembling mosques. The domed mosque with its pointy minarets might very well be the most widely recognized symbol of Islam. The mosque grave brings the mosque—a place of collective worship that might be located near or adjacent to a burial ground—into the heart of the cemetery itself, albeit in miniaturized form. Beyond the conspicuous visual effect generated by the existence of mini mosques scattered among the mortuary landscape, the mosque grave occasions a socio-spatial reorientation for worshippers and mourners. The lines between sites of worship, pilgrimage, and prayer become blurred as the gravesite is re-imagined as something more than a place for the deposition of human remains. The dead Muslim body, which endows the soil with Islamic qualities, is directly linked to the most recognizable symbol of Islamic faith. The proximity of the mosque to the dead also mimics the medieval Christian practice of burying the dead directly under the grounds of the church. This practice, usually reserved for the rich or the holy, is given new lease in the diaspora cemetery. If you can't bury under the mosque, why not build a mosque over your grave? (see figures 6-7).



Figures 6 and 7: Mosque Graves

The landscape of the cemetery is transformed as it is imbued with new religious iconography. What is novel about the mosque grave as a cultural and architectural practice is how the built form of the mosque is deracinated from its original, everyday context and location and

appears in a new and unexpected locale. It is an example of what art historian Christine Gruber has termed “Islamic architecture on the move.”⁷

I want to suggest that the use of Islamic architectural elements like the mosque grave in the cemeteries of Berlin is, in part, a response to the political challenges faced by the city's Muslim communities. The incorporation of religious architecture and design in the public space of the cemetery represents an innovative step towards the normalization of Islamic symbols in the German landscape. The visibility of such symbols has provoked controversy across Europe, and efforts to build actual mosques and places of worship have been undermined by municipal officials in a number of different countries (usually on technical grounds or with reference to zoning laws).⁸ The placement of miniature mosques in the space of the cemetery reflects efforts by Germany's Muslim communities to express their religious identities and beliefs in the public sphere.

Rather than assuming that the expression of national, ethnic, or religious belonging is simply evidence of cultural retention, I think it is also helpful to understand these gestures as evidence for the changing horizons of German identity. Read in this light, expressions of Islam are not articulations of an outside, extraneous, or foreign culture, but, rather, they are part of Germany's evolving and dynamic society. While mosques and minarets may currently seem out of place in the cemetery or the city, their proliferation might help neutralize their effect and make them as invisible and unremarkable as the crosses and church towers that are an integral part of Berlin's urban landscape.

⁷ Christine Gruber. *Islamic Architecture on the Move*. Bristol: Intellect Press, 2016.

⁸ See Jocelyne Cesari. “Mosque Conflicts in European Cities: Introduction” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. Volume 31, No. 6 (2005): 1015 – 1024.