

Multiculturalism, Integration and Contact amongst Socio-Ethnic Groups in Malta

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Migration has always been a way of life for islands. At the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta was always open to regional cross-fertilisation. There is biological evidence of this contact by geneticists who observed in Malta lineages similar to those of southern Italy, North Africa and the Middle East. These links are corroborated by influences on the Maltese language, place names and surnames that vividly illustrate solid interconnections with the Arab Muslim world.

It is therefore not surprising that the British anthropologist Jon Mitchell, who studied the Maltese islands on the eve of EU membership, had concluded that we are “ambivalent Europeans”.

The ambition to join the EU was in fact partly driven by a desire to assert Maltese identity within the European fold. During the harshly fought EU referendum campaign, one of the most memorable arguments used by the Yes Campaigners was that outside the EU we would end up “like the Tunisians and the Algerians” an argument that was rooted in polarised debate about Malta’s place in the world. Segments of the Maltese population were always uneasy with our geographical position and our proximity to the Arab Muslim domain.

This proximity had opened the way for the Maltese to establish themselves in Tunis, in various cities in Libya, Egypt and Turkey. Likewise people from the area settled in Malta. Today one of the most prolific and respected contemporary authors of the Maltese language is Walid Nabhan, a Palestinian. Language is the most important key to integration and the Semitic roots of the Maltese language often facilitate understanding with Arabs that visit or settle in Malta. Two and a

half centuries of rule by the Knights of St John and the deep rooted influence of the Roman Catholic Church did not eradicate people's supplication to 'God' as the one and only *Alla(h)*.

During our post-colonial years while Malta struggled to democratise and advance its economy, it endured late secularisation. Late secularisation is deemed to be a characteristic of 'Mediterraneanism', where countries in the European South were not far too distant from the challenges that were faced by the Maghreb. While the secular urban regimes in North Africa did not seek to democratize, they sought to 'modernize' their nations and secularism was one of their common missions.

Similar tensions were faced decades earlier by the European south. Until the Portuguese Carnation Revolution of 1974, some northern political scientists and commentators dismissed the southern Catholic culture as being unsuited to democracy especially wherever the Church hierarchy was in cahoots with dictators. Similar arguments surfaced in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, whenever the promise of democratisation was not delivered. Reductionist perspectives speculated that Muslim propensity towards democracy is weak. Such opinions dampen integration efforts since Muslims are frequently portrayed as threats to democratic values wherever they may live.

Let me now jog my memory in order to trace the rise of Islamophobia in the Maltese islands based on my own lived experience.

1979 is an important year for our discussion. In our collective memory it was the year when Britain ended its military presence. While the former Prime Minister Dom Mintoff commissioned the famous Greek composer Mikis Theodorakis to compose *I-Innu tal-Helsien* and ordered compulsory Arabic language lessons in all schools, Western Europe and the Opposition in Malta were uneasy with his friendship and dealings with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. They also rebutted the concept of neutrality and Mintoff's insistence on a 'Mediterranean policy'. It was against this backdrop that Gaddafi laid the foundation stone of Malta's first and only Muslim Mosque in the town of Paola. Then, in spite of the oppositions' harsh criticism, there were no significant popular demonstrations against the Muslim place of worship. The Mosque was merely another theme within the realm of highly polarized partisan discourse as the Opposition broadly rejected government's flirting with the Arab world and it dismissed Libyans as "tal-habbaziez".

1979, was an even more crucial year at an international level. It saw the storming of the US embassy in Teheran after the Islamic Revolution that disposed the Shia of Iran. In November of that year, fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days by a group of Iranian Muslim Students that took control of the U.S. Embassy, an incident that cost President Jimmy Carter his re-election. It was in this year that Carter launched the covert *Operation Cyclone* in Afghanistan

where prior to and during the Soviet invasion, the CIA trained and funded Moslem insurgents. Later, when all the world was wiser, there were widespread allegations (denied by the Americans) that this assistance was also afforded to one prominent guerrilla fighter who goes by the name of Osama Ben Laden.

In his book *Covering Islam: How the Media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the World*, the late Edward Said observed that it was after the Iranian revolution that the US became concerned with Islamic revivalism. He observed that under the geo-political order of the Cold War, Arab and Muslim states were viewed as strategic allies. So in spite of the open ultra-conservative Salafism of the Saudi royal family or the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood had been active in Egypt since the 1920s, Islam and Muslims were not deemed to be Western enemies. It was only in the post-Cold War that Islam turned into the new Face of Evil and in some instances the theory of a Clash of Civilisations became a gloomy self-fulfilling prophecy.

The attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in September 2001 lead to the 'war on terror,' which was packaged by the media as a 'just war' and led to US unilateral military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The latter was backed by a public relations campaign that falsely put Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator, in the same basket with Al Qaeda jihadists. By this time, both in the US and Europe, people were already susceptible to Islamophobia because of the build-up of a negative narrative that started with the long saga of the American embassy in Tehran, the first Gulf War of 1991 and the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993.

Media scholar Daya Thussu (2006) noted that Islamophobia reached new heights after the attacks of 9/11 when approximately 1 billion Muslims were depicted as potential terrorists. Western news media were prone to portray Islam as a monolithic entity, synonymous with terrorism and religious hysteria. This label soon groomed a broader and deeper anti-Western sentiment in many parts of the world.

Mainstream media, gave very superficial explanations and they often dumbed-down complex debates on political Islam. For instance they repeatedly failed to explain why Muslim radicals garnered support from underprivileged classes in those contexts where the secular regimes failed to provide for people's basic needs. When secular nationalist regimes were disposed by the revolutions of the so called 'Arab Spring', western media expected Arab states to immediately embrace the liberal democratic model when in fact some of the groups involved in the uprisings did not have this agenda.

In fact some Islamist groups soon challenged the objectives of secular parties. Peter Mandaville (2014), author of *Islam and Politics* noted that there are stark differences among Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, En-Nahda, Hamas, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram, but there are also common traits.

These include: a) provision of services that states failed to deliver; b) leading popular resistance against foreign influence and c) “offer[ing] the conflation of Islamism with a variety of sub-national identity formations” when national identities are seen to be superseded.

Awareness of these complexities in the West is limited. Instead a proliferation of stereotyped images infuse media representations of Islam and Muslims. In the 1960s Galtung and Ruge (1965) had already empirically established that media texts were frequently influenced by propaganda and public relations that dehumanize the enemy and render rapprochement difficult. Media workers often internalize the ‘us’ against ‘them’ distinctions, which become matter-of-fact assumptions. This impacts their everyday professional practices and their output, thus influencing the information people receive.

Mainstream media frequently trigger hysteria, implicitly portraying all Muslims in the category of ‘folk devils’ (Cohen, 1972) and a threat to Western society’s values and interests. When society panics, apprehensive governments are more prone to deploy drastic measures against particular groups.

Ironically, violent fundamentalists themselves thrive on these caricatures. In Europe, this culminated when ISIS combatants took control of Mosul in Iraq and later of extensive adjacent territory in Syria. As the Islamic State spread its wings, journalist Graeme Wood (2015) described it as a caliphate bigger in size than the United Kingdom. Mass hysteria gripped Europeans when the hidden face of ISIS combatants appeared on the social media committing acts of carefully choreographed brutality to effectively terrorize societies that had long abandoned public executions.

The Charlie Hebdo attacks of January 2015 occurred in the context of fears of ISIS, even if the attackers were linked to Al Qaeda rather than the Islamic State. The attackers’ goal was more far-reaching and long-term than is often presumed. They were aware their violent attacks would foment public hysteria and anti-Muslim prejudice in France and in Europe. Their aim was to further polarize European public opinion as this further disenchanted and radicalized disillusioned members of different Muslim communities in France, Europe and elsewhere. Another media scholar Des Freedman (2015) aptly observed that these operatives were not motivated by the images in the magazine per se: “Their attacks can be interpreted as a subtle call for resistance against Western policies”.

Back to Malta. While orientalist perspectives had long existed, along the years Arab families were broadly well integrated in society. The advent of internet dating, mass tourism, opportunities of work mobility and overseas educational opportunities boosted interactions among socio-ethnic groups. By the 1990s NSO statistics showed that about one fifth of marriages in Malta were with foreign individuals including individuals hailing from Arab Muslim countries, namely

Libya and Tunisia. Initially the Catholic Curia even permitted these marriages to take place in Church on the condition that their children are raised as Christians. While some of these relationships soon felt the strain of cultural differences, many survived. By the time of the election of 2013 the number of Muslims was significant to an extent that they got political attention. The Labour Party was inspired to celebrate the 'Breaking of the Fast' (*Ghid al Fitr*) at its headquarters in Hamrun. It soon endorsed its first Muslim candidate, who was later elected as a local councillor and took the oath on the Quran. However many other Muslims do not enjoy any political rights at all.

In spite of ample lip service to integration, this was delayed for many years and today Malta ranks 33rd out of 38 places on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2014). When we discuss integration processes we cannot distinguish the plight of Arabs from that of the other individuals hailing from other parts of the world. Racism and Islamophobia present very similar challenges and one does not preclude the other. Indeed sub-Saharan Muslims are victims to both.

In my research on Maltese Media and migration I avoided the positivistic path fearing that I might miss the trees for the woods. There are complexities and patterns that may not be captured by numbers but which are decipherable in personal accounts and interpretations.

In my work I have looked at Maltese journalists' perceptions on immigration since the arrival of the first boat peoples until the recent arrivals from Libya and Syria. I am also interested in the new polarism in journalism which revolves around divergent narratives on migration. This polarisation goes beyond old party lines. My empirical research spans over twelve years, where some journalists were observed performing the role of public intellectuals.

The role of public intellectuals cannot be underestimated. Last year a survey published by *Malta Today* confirmed that Maltese respondents became more open and supportive of integration policies when they were given sufficient information. Hence ignorance is indeed extremely dangerous and leads many individuals to become susceptible to anti-immigrant narratives.

Resistance to integration efforts may indeed stall the whole project as confirmed by the Civil Liberties minister Dr Helena Dalli: "*While Malta has seen a "meteoric rise" on Europe's Rainbow Index (measure LGBTI rights) ... a similar rapid rise on the Migrant Integration Policy Index is "unlikely" because migrant integration ... needs a sustained information campaign to raise awareness and knowledge about what integration means in practice*"¹.

¹ <http://www.mipex.eu/promoting-integration-migrants-harder-gay-rights-dalli>

During these years it transpired that some journalists and columnists, namely those writing for English-language media, formed a front that championed the rights of immigrants and pressed the Maltese authorities to honour international obligations. They are also willing to explain to their readers/audiences what integration means in practice.

These journalists advocate humanitarianism and a notion of security that emphasizes justice and the protection of the immigrants' rights. While these journalists have ample opportunity to set the agenda, they are aware of the textual polysemy that permits readers to interpret and reject their text. "The divide fosters tricky situations that almost encourage self-censorship, because I know that what I write will somehow be manipulated" confessed a freelance journalist recently (personal communication, 2016).

Interactive media permit readers to actively oppose the message to an extent that most journalists expressed anxiety about audience responses (including online comments boards, the social media and letters to the editor) which are prone to be extremely xenophobic. On comments boards, journalists are often subject to vicious attacks by irritated readers when they are seen as being sympathetic with the plight of 'others'.

As most media organisations are now reluctant to serve as a platform to racists and islamophobes, it was observed that these migrated to the social media where a virtual echo-chamber has not yet turned into a significant voting constituency.

This presents an interesting scenario which reveals that the three main commercial newspapers, that are struggling to retain their market share in view of bigger competition, are not yet completely audience-driven. In this context journalists are still clearly treating their readers as citizens rather than consumers.

In spite of these reporters who champion migrant rights, there are still a number of other media players who equate immigrants with 'folk devils' who threaten societal values and interests. Sociologist Stanley Cohen (1972) explained how trapped in panic, society reacts against social groups that are deemed as a menace. Cyclical 'panics' may lead authorities to legitimate draconian measures that involve enforcement agencies. The rise of the social media and the so called 'citizen journalist' exacerbated the situation.

The case of a knife attack in the popular entertainment area of Paceville, where the perpetrator was a Libyan national, presents an interesting example (Leone-Ganado, 2015).

In mid-September 2015, a Libyan man was accused of brutally knifing 6 individuals causing them grievous injuries. The incident stirred an online uproar when onlookers posted on Facebook that they had seen him knife at least 26 people, a rumour that was unconfirmed but repeated by leading media outlets,

including PBS News. A massive wave of xenophobia and islamophobia overcrowded the virtual world especially after the accused appeared visibly unrepentant and defiant as he was filmed by television cameras while being escorted to court. As soon as hospital sources confirmed the actual lower number of victims, segments of the public conspired that there was a major cover-up in the wake of a terrorist, or even jihadist attack. Some went as far as claiming they heard him chant “*Allah hu Akbar*” while he attacked innocent victims. I spoke to leading journalists who refused to accept that the victims were fewer in number than what they had originally reported. This incident soon stirred public calls and political pressure to escalate police presence in this busy entertainment area. For many commentators this attack was deemed as evidence that integration efforts cannot succeed and that Malta must step up its national security measures.

But, national security does not merely entail the policing and patrolling of state borders. Security must also be built collectively in our everyday lives and it entails justice and the protection of migrant’s rights. One journalist, who has children with her husband who is of African origins, is fully aware of:

“We must remember now that we have children of colour in our schools, including multiracial Maltese kids. We have to protect human beings, and be careful when throwing stones at each other, for they might bounce back straight into our face”.

Editors are increasingly more aware of this too. There was a time when they deemed the idiosyncratic voices of the local far-right as an opportunity to attract audiences because extremist candidates like Norman Lowell were deemed to provide a comic spectacle. Then it was assumed that people would laugh but not follow. Later, when immigrant boat arrivals stirred widespread apprehensions, the media saw the danger that these fringe views may propel the rise of successful populist movements as experienced elsewhere in Europe. Some editors resented giving them a platform. Yet, they also ran the risk of ignoring a very real public sentiment represented by these small but vociferous groups. Discounting the Far-Right altogether would have backfired.

“It does not pay to antagonise the Far Right. When we fiercely attacked the Far Right, we were strengthening it. At some point we reached a natural consensus and somehow we switched off the likes of Normal Lowell and he eventually disappeared. The ‘Patriots’ never picked up because legacy media do not give them excessive coverage” (personal communication, 2016).

Nonetheless, in the era of the social media, racism and Islamophobia will always have a platform. Interactive media provide ample opportunities for individuals taking damaging stances against ‘invading others’. These online debates are significant even when they lack coherence and participants are usually virtually locked into echo-chambers with like-minded members.

The terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016, especially the attacks in Paris on November 13th 2015, stirred mass hysteria in the Maltese islands too. Then Malta was on high alert in preparation for two summits that were held in Valletta: one convened European Union and African Union leaders to discuss migration and the other convened Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) headed by Queen Elizabeth II. When ISIS (Daesh) claimed responsibility for the Paris attacks, a stone throw away in neighbouring Libya, Daesh militants were gaining control over more territory. The Paris attacks kept some Maltese families locked safely inside for the duration of the CHOGM summit, a decision that was encouraged by the authorities because schools, the University and many offices remained closed on Friday 27th November. Indeed, the intended victims of Paris shootings were far beyond the direct targets who lost their lives in the attacks on French territory.

Extremist attacks stirred new predicaments for those journalists who had become active advocates of multi-culturalism. One reporter lamented: “The idiots behind what happened in Cologne [i.e. the sexual assaults in Germany, on New Year’s Eve of 2016] have made it very difficult for us advocating multi-culturalism” (personal communication 2016). A small group of individuals that has a strong presence on the social media, called ‘*Għaqda Patrijotti Maltin*’ (Maltese Patriots), then gathered momentum in its strong online objections to Muslim demands for a new mosque or a prayer room. A small group of individuals took their campaign to the streets where they took umbrage as Muslims that congregated in open public spaces for their Friday prayers. The *Patrijotti* were even more livid when the Catholic Dominican friars opened their College to the Muslim community after the St Paul’s Bay Local Council blocked permits for a Muslim prayer room in the Northern part of the Island.

In this context journalists are facing new dilemmas and one of the most vociferous champions of immigrant rights confessed he wished to approach debates on Islam with caution because he does not know much about it. How can one perform his duty to inform when one acknowledges that he is not adequately prepared or skilled to make sense of the situation that is unfolding? Similarly, another editor stated that in his personal view religion and worship should best remain a private affair.

For decades the small Muslim community in Malta prayed in its only mosque. Otherwise most Muslims kept their religion as a private affair. Now that Maltese society is becoming more complex, it seems that this will no longer be the case.

In Conclusion: Journalists are still grappling with matters that are related to integration processes and minority rights. In the past years Maltese journalism developed a critical mass so that more individuals see themselves as public

intellectuals with a significant interpretative role. Advocacy journalism is frequently employed to promote migrant rights and non-state actors like NGOs (national or international) have become important sources of news. There is a degree of reflexivity among media professionals as they face ample popular resentment especially in view of integration processes and the rights of ethnic minorities.

As journalists face many new questions, it seems they have realised that the answers do not come easy.

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