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# Editorial: Conceptualising 'Muslim Diaspora'

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In memoriam Christoph Schumann (1969-2013)

Muslim communities located outside the commonly recognised 'Muslim world' are widely labelled, both in and beyond academic discourses, as living in a diaspora. At the same time, the widespread use of the notion 'Muslim diaspora' in contemporary cultural, societal, political and scientific-essayist writing and the media is rarely discussed or questioned. Such a blithe use of the label makes two major hazardous assumptions: first, it implicitly states an ontic category of self-description; and second, it supposes the existence of

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a scholarly consensus on the appropriateness of its use. Yet neither of these assumptions is accurate.

By critically opening this discussion, we are not attempting to 'delete' the term 'Muslim diaspora'. On the contrary, we argue that notions of 'Muslim diaspora' can be used as helpful analytical tools if theoretically embedded and methodologically reflected. By employing them in such ways, they can help increase understanding vis-à-vis related ideas such as concepts of trans-national and trans-cultural Muslim communities, Muslim minorities, or the idea of a global *umma*. Broader theoretical discussions about concepts of 'Muslim diaspora' are, however, understudied and require further research.

In order to bridge this research gap, we sought to explore various notions of 'Muslim diaspora', possible ways of conceptualisation, and their respective scope and limitations, which resulted in a series of international and interdisciplinary workshops at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany). In addition to discussions of a range of case studies on Muslims living in non-Muslim majority societies both within and without the so-called West, the first workshop in 2011 focussed on questions of legitimacy and normative problems in using 'diaspora' as an analytical category within empirical research. Based on the outcome of this meeting, the two following workshops in 2012 and 2013 addressed various concepts of 'Muslim diaspora' that have been developed by the contributors on the basis of their empirical research. Within the realm of these endeavours, we tried to explore the possibilities of these concepts in order to understand contemporary realities of Muslim communities in Muslim minority contexts which are—more than ever—characterised by interwoven trans-local relationships, specific religious and cultural practices, and questions of (spatial) identity and belonging. Our last meeting in 2014 was dedicated to this special issue, which presents the outcome of our discussions.

## 'Muslim Diaspora': The State of the Art

While the term 'diaspora' mainly had a religious significance in scholarly discussions during the 1960s, it currently allows for a variety of different meanings and contexts. It appears in various fields of research within social sciences and humanities that deal with migration and with ethnic communities who refer to an absent—real or imagined—homeland (see, e.g., Vertovec and Cohen, 1999, and in a most recent compilation of multi-disciplinary contributions Kläger and Stierstorfer, 2015). Whereas the Jewish diaspora has been seen as archetypal across academic disciplines (Safran, 1999: 365), similar notions, such as the Armenian, Turkish, Greek, Palestinian, Chinese and African diaspora,

have also been introduced into academic discourse (Hall, 1990; Tölölyan, 1991, with regard to the nation state; Braziel and Mannur, 2003; Cohen, 2008, for an overview), the last mainly due to Paul Gilroy's (1993) concept of the 'Black Atlantic'. Besides Gilroy, other contributions in the field of post-colonial studies have used the notion of 'diaspora', in particular, to conceptualise hybrid post-colonial identities (see Procter, 2007, for a short summary). Because of such multiple usages of the term, critics have argued that the idea of 'diaspora' is at risk of being overstretched and becoming a 'catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements' (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 3), a point illustrated even more graphically by Rogers Brubaker when he writes: 'If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so', claiming that this would result in 'los[ing] [the term's] discriminating power—its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora' (Brubaker, 2005: 3).

With regard to further qualifying 'diaspora', especially as 'Muslim diaspora' or 'Islamic diaspora', the focus of the present volume, the matter becomes even more complicated by the fact that Muslim communities do not necessarily define their common identity by a mythicised territorial origin. The bulk of the existing studies in European languages on this topic appear to shy away somewhat from addressing this issue in depth and instead confine themselves to the descriptive mode of empirical case studies or general overviews about Muslim communities in minority contexts. Here, the terms 'Muslim' or 'Islamic diaspora' are used in reference to many different things and, at the same time, as ontic categories with little explanation or theoretical reflection (to name just a few examples: Pallavicini, 2013; Ben-Rafael, 2013; Ramírez, 2011; Cysneiros, 2010; Akbarzadeh and Mansouri, 2010; Viganò, 2007; Hilu da Rocha Pinto, 2005; Leweling, 2005; Ceylan, 2002; Jenkins, 1999; Landmann and Kandler, 1996). Consequently—as is also the case for the term 'diaspora' in general—the notions of 'Muslim diaspora' or 'Islamic diaspora' are also at risk of being overused and thus losing any possible analytical value.

Although the vast majority of contributions that use 'Muslim diaspora' or 'Islamic diaspora' without clear definitions, a number of studies do reflect the range of possible meanings of these terms. Peter Mandaville (2001), for example, frequently refers to the notion of 'Muslim diaspora' and connects it with transnational politics and imaginations of the *umma*. Haideh Moghissi, in her edited book *Muslim Diaspora*, merges different disciplinary perspectives, arguing that the 'term [Muslim diaspora] with increasing popularity, may have at its core a more political than a cultural impulse' (2006: XIV). Among the book's chapters, Saeed Rahnema's text about 'Islam in diaspora and challenges to multiculturalism' may be the most precise in terms of definitions. He suggests

seeing 'Muslim diaspora' as constituted by a 'triple identity', composed of a religious, an original national and a new national identity (Rahnema, 2006). In her second edited book on this topic, Moghissi, together with Saeed Rahnema and Mark J. Goodman, discusses 'the characteristics that differentiate an expatriate group from a diasporic group'. Concerning 'Muslim diaspora', they suggest that its 'most important feature is its collective consciousness about the group members' marginal location in the larger society in which they reside' (Moghissi, Goodman and Rahnema, 2009: 11). Focusing on notions of gender and belonging, Moghissi continues the discussion of 'Muslim diaspora' in another publication, co-edited with Halleh Ghorashi (2010). Furthermore, Christoph Schumann (2007) is to be mentioned here because of his endeavours to describe and analyse the political discourse of Muslim Americans in the United States. He uses the term 'diaspora' as a tool for his empirical research on Muslims and their practice of constantly redefining their identity, politically mobilising their community, and readjusting their twofold affiliations to American society and the so-called Islamic world. In summary, all of these approaches to 'Muslim diaspora' provide clear definitions to work with, yet without elaborating on the respective theoretical, methodological and philosophical implications of this notion.

Only a small number of studies provide profound theoretical reflections about 'Muslim diaspora' (for a short overview see, e.g., Tiesler, 2009). Chantal Saint-Blancat (1995, 2002) made a sociological attempt to conceptualise the notion of Muslim diaspora more systematically, with a focus on diaspora(s) in Europe 'between reterritorialisation and extraterritoriality' (for further discussion of her ideas see Albrecht in this issue). From an anthropological point of view, Pnina Werbner (2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2009) also seeks to conceptualise the notion of '(Muslim) diaspora' in her studies on South Asian Muslims in the UK. She describes a 'diasporic public sphere' which 'may be grasped as ambiguously placed within the broader public sphere of the nation—in this case Britain—and its extraterritorial extensions—the Islamic community or *umma*, on the one hand, and Pakistan [...] on the other' (2000: 319). In an anti-essentialist approach, Salman Sayyid (2000) formulates the idea of the *umma* as diasporic. While considering the nation as an incomplete political project, the Muslim *umma* stands, for him, as a universal cultural formation that offers a possibility beyond the era and process of global de-nationalisation. Michael E. Samers (2003) takes up and rethinks the approaches to 'diaspora' and 'Muslim diaspora' of Sayyid (2000) and Floya Anthias (1998), seeing the 'unbound' entity of the *umma* as a diasporic register of collective identities. Samers suggests exploring the processes that produce collective 'diaspora practices' rather than assuming diaspora as an *a priori* existing condition. Finally, the contribution by Rivka Yadlin (2002) should be mentioned. She defines Muslim communities

in Western countries as new 'trans-state associations'. For her, they constitute a new type of 'Muslim nationalism' that embraces the values of a cultural, non-territorial ideology of Muslims being confronted with the values of Western host societies.

This last group of publications particularly has shown that an engagement with 'Muslim diaspora' does not necessarily mean to blur the term, but—if based on theoretical foundation—to make it analytically useful and prolific. In this sense, we consider these publications as important steps towards a broader theoretical and methodological discussion about 'Muslim diaspora' and its added value as an analytical tool. With our themed issue 'Conceptualising Muslim diaspora' we want to build on these existing studies and contribute to the discussion in a threefold manner.

1. On the basis of the trans-disciplinary exchange within our research group, we seek to broaden the perspective of how 'Muslim diaspora' may be conceptualised, considering (rather) inductive as well as (rather) deductive approaches.
2. With our focus on *conceptualising* 'Muslim diaspora', we aim to address methodological and self-reflexive issues, such as questions of self-description and description by others (or by us as researchers), as well as the respective normative implications.
3. Our articles seek to widen the scope of case studies in a trans-local, trans-regional, and trans-national sense. While the aforementioned studies are mainly concerned with Muslim communities in Europe or North America, we have also built our discussions of the conceptualisation of 'Muslim diaspora' on case studies in many other parts of the world, aiming at a 'decentralisation' of the focus on the so-called West. With this approach, we do not only seek to pay tribute to post-colonial critique (that is, to overcome generalising concepts based on Europe and North America as the only references). We also think that the consideration of other geographical contexts of Muslim minorities raises new issues and problems and reveals so far disregarded dimensions of 'Muslim diaspora'. This, in turn, may open up new perspectives on Muslims in Europe and in North America.

## Conceptualising 'Muslim Diaspora': The Contributions

Matthias Gebauer and Shadia Husseini de Araújo examine identity constructions of Muslim minorities in Brazil and South Africa. In their case studies, the communities do not use the notion 'diaspora' to describe their own identity.

Rather, they identify with specific ideas of transnational 'Muslim Blackness', which are closely connected to political resistance to post-colonial suppression and discrimination. These ideas are first analysed deductively by the authors, using Gilroy's concept of 'the Black Atlantic Diaspora' (1993). The second step takes an inductive approach, discussing the meaning of being Muslim in the respective contexts of the two case studies, and then, on this basis, reformulating the theoretical approach. The aim of the article is to develop a notion of 'Black and Muslim diaspora' that can be used as an analytical framework to understand particular counter-cultures challenging and struggling against conditions of everyday life and societal structures within the post-colonial nation-state.

Using the adjective 'diasporic' instead of the noun 'diaspora', Tobias Boos indicates that communities are always embedded in social and cultural contexts, which gives each community a special quality. In the case of Muslims in Argentina, this quality can be understood as 'diasporic' because it is characterised by a sense of being oppressed and discriminated against, and of being a global community. He demonstrates that they build fragmented communities that have to be recognised as integrated into the host society. Employing the concepts of 'atmosphere' and 'sphere', as derived from Sloterdijk (1998, 1999, and 2004), the author challenges the idea of a homogeneous community. This approach shows how Muslims living in local contexts simultaneously construct a global community using specific objects, ideas and discourses.

Samuel M. Behloul sheds light on the ambivalent role of religion in terms of its potential to both generate and overcome the diasporic consciousness of migrant communities. In this regard, the author conceptualises 'diaspora' as a discursive process of (re-)negotiating communal identity. Using two examples of Muslim minority communities in Switzerland, the Bosnian and the Albanian communities, he shows that the former builds its diasporic identity upon its religious consciousness while the latter, for religious reasons, does not. Bosnian Muslims identify (and describe) themselves, from a specific historical moment onwards, as a 'Bosnian Muslim diaspora'—a process of developing strategies of identity formation that shows many parallels with the strategies of 'diasporising' the communal identity of other, non-Muslim migrant communities, such as Serbs and Croats.

Taking the example of Muslims of Indian origin in Mauritius, Patrick Eisenlohr demonstrates that religion can become a resource for long-distance political allegiances mobilised by trans-national or even global religious authorities. In his investigation of what he refers to as 'diasporisation processes' he considers diaspora as a condition, as well as a category of practice and

self-description, and draws a connection between diaspora and the regulation of religion with its trans-national dimensions. Thus, he points out one of the most crucial dimensions of conceptualising diaspora, that is, its relation with the nation-state. In addition to such an understanding of diaspora, the author uses the term as an analytical category derived from comparative research. These dimensions of diaspora, he argues, are inseparable in ethnographic and historical research. From this perspective, diaspora is used and analysed as a category of both practice and analysis, similar to other categories, such as nation, class, and identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 4-6).

Finally, Sarah Albrecht sheds light on the notion of 'Muslim diaspora' in the contemporary Islamic discourse on Muslims in the West. Focusing on Yusuf al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), Taha Jabir al-Alwani (b. 1935), Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962) and Aref Ali Nayed (b. 1962), she explores how prominent Muslim legal scholars and intellectuals construct—or criticise and deconstruct—the idea of a 'Muslim diaspora'. Although the term 'diaspora' itself is hardly used in any of their writings on Muslims in non-Muslim majority countries, the question of whether these Muslims form a somewhat 'diasporic' community is a matter of contestation. While some conceive of these Muslims as living in a state of diaspora or exile (*mahjar*), outside of the 'territory of Islam' (*dār al-islām*), and therefore far from the 'Islamic homeland' (*al-waṭan al-islāmī*), others challenge this idea, denying that Muslims are bound to any distant, religiously defined place of origin and belonging.

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