

# Canadian Muslims

## Demographic Composition

Canada is the world's second-largest country by area and is the largest in the Western hemisphere. Despite spreading over such a large area, Canada has a small population. A country of about 35 million people, Canada has a democratic and federal system. Canada is composed of 10 provinces and three territories. Quebec is the largest province in the country and the only French-speaking one. The official languages of Canada are English and French. Offering a high level of welfare and new opportunities, Canada has become an attractive destination for many people. Canada as a land of immigrants, updates its migration policies with regard both to the global conjuncture and its own needs. For instance, until the mid-20th century, the country did not accept non-Christian immigrants.

Migration to Canada took place in different periods in the form of waves. The first wave came from Eastern Europe, the second from Pakistan and India, and the third from Egypt and Lebanon. More recently, there has been migration from Algeria and Syria. As the new hope for citizens of countries dealing with crises, Canada has almost become a second home for Muslims because of the ongoing crises in the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East. Along with Middle Eastern immigrants, a large number from the Far East, Africa and Latin America have chosen to settle in Canada. According to the data provided by Statistics Canada, one out of every five residents in Canada is foreign-born. According to the same data, about 10 million individuals identify as Canadian, while other large groups identify as English, French, Irish, or German. Muslim immigrants are still in a minority position and come from ethnic groups whose numbers are no more than a million. Home to so much ethnic diversity, Canada officially adopted a policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Thus, the same rights were given to every Canadian without distinction between ethnicity, religion, language, or race. Thanks to this, all citizens can retain their own values and traditions, while also contributing to the political, economic and social life of Canada. In addition to giving every man and woman the freedoms of thought, religion and expression, the Multiculturalism Act also gives the freedoms of association and peaceful assembly. These freedoms are protected by Canadian citizenship, by the country's constitution and by the legislation on human rights and freedoms. Therefore everyone is treated equally before the law. Such practices make inter-ethnic and inter-religious communication easier, and encourage mutual understanding and tolerance. Promoting integration rather than assimilation, this policy recognizes all citizens as equals and does not recognize any culture as superior. In Quebec, however, the policy of multiculturalism has been rejected. A policy of interculturalism was proposed as an alternative, but never became law. As the only Francophone province in North America, Quebec takes special care to protect its identity and engages in various activities to this end. Resembling multiculturalism from a number of points, interculturalism gives priority to Quebecois culture and sets a series of values to which everyone must subscribe. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of French as the lingua franca, on secularism and on gender equality. For this reason, the integration process in Quebec follows a somewhat different course than the same process in other provinces.

## History

According to a census taken four years after Canada gained its independence in 1867, there were 13 European Muslims residing in the country. In light of this, the first Muslim migration to Canada is estimated to have occurred in the 1800s. However, the more noteworthy waves of migration to the country started in the 1960s. It was in these years that the Canadian government decided to take education and skills rather than ethnicity into account while admitting immigrants. This allowed the Muslims to migrate there more easily. Having founded small associations and charities at first, Muslims went on to own large mosques and institutions. Migration from Turkey to Canada, for example, began in the 1980s. The Turks have recently managed to establish large associations, charities, mosques and schools in the cities of Toronto, Montreal and Edmonton. It is possible to say that all Muslim minorities in the country experience a similar situation, for they are bound together by a minority consciousness which influences them to act together. For example, ghettoization following initial migration can be observed among Pakistanis, Iranians and Arabs in many cities. However, now the situation is a bit different. According to the census taken in 2011, Muslims account for 3.2% of Canada's population. This corresponds to a population of about 1 million. Arabs account for 57% of this population. The distribution of other ethnicities among Canadian Muslims is as follows: South Asians 17%, Iranians and Afghans 7%, Turks 3% and others 16%. Islam has become the second largest religion in Canada after Christianity, and the fastest growing. The majority of Canadian

Muslims live in the province of Ontario, particularly in the city of Toronto. In addition to this, Ottawa, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton are other cities preferred by Muslim immigrants. The first mosque in the country was built in 1938 in the city of Edmonton by European Muslims. The majority of the young Muslim population can be said to have assimilated with their surroundings. The early immigrants managed to preserve their faith, culture and way of life, and to pass their values on to the next generation. However, the new generation has adjusted to life in Canada and embraced a way of living that fits in with the country's liberal tendencies. There are, of course, young people who preserve their identity and protect their national and spiritual values. However, their numbers are very small. Almost every Muslim group goes through the same experience and fails to sufficiently pass on Islamic values to the next generation. Forgetting their religion and culture, young Muslims also lose their parents' native languages. The very high level of welfare in Canada and the great living conditions cause the young generation to lose their ability to think and act unanimously. Therefore, with limited awareness, the new generations who grow up in Canada are being deprived of their values. Despite the establishment of various charities, mosques and education centers, it can be observed that the young generation leans more toward Canadian culture and a Canadian way of life and mindset.

## **Socioeconomic Situation**

Muslims living in Canada cannot be said to form a homogeneous community. In addition to denominational differences, such as between Shites and Sunnis, there are also ethnic and national differences. The situation yields itself to certain generalizations, but it would be misleading to evaluate all Muslims as if they were a single entity. When Muslims establish a charity or another institution, they do so more in an effort to preserve their own ethnicity or their national and spiritual values. However, if such an institution has a mosque, it will be open to all Muslims. In this way, interaction between different Muslim groups can take place actively through the agency of mosques. The vast majority of Muslims work as laborers. As has been said, the reasons for migrating are generally related to economic conditions. However, levels of education among Canadian Muslims are generally high in comparison to the immigrant populations of many other host countries. For example, 27% of Muslims aged 25-44 who make up the primary workforce have one or more university degrees. This ratio is lower among other religious groups in the country. Additionally, it is observed that Muslims prefer to work for a reasonable salary to make a living, rather than taking advantage of the unemployment benefits and social welfare offered by the state. In this way, Muslims became much less of an economic burden on the Canadian state and they have started contributing positively to the Canadian economy.

Muslims are generally known in the country as trustworthy people. Therefore, they can find employment in various sectors. While Muslims are employed mostly in the sales and service sector, their presence is felt also in the commerce, finance and management. But, refusing to recognize the university degrees of these educated and experienced people who come from all around the world, Canada forces everyone to receive Canadian education. For this reason, people who come from the Middle East and other parts of the world lose hope and are forced to do jobs that have nothing to do with their degree, such as being taxi drivers. There is discrimination in both the private and public sectors, especially against the black and Arab population. Many companies demand fluency in both official languages as a prerequisite.

There have been numerous studies revealing that the majority of institutions and organizations in the country do not recognize education and experience received outside of Canada. This is one of the key reasons why immigrants cannot find jobs that are relevant to their qualifications. Added to this, some immigrants note that they cannot find jobs, despite having been educated in Canada. This is a situation that affects all immigrants, not only Muslims. The Muslim community has started numerous commercial businesses as well as small and large ventures around the country in order to circumvent such obstacles. For example, the Turks, Syrians and Lebanese are quite active as restaurant owners. Iranians, on the other hand, prefer to manage large cafes or grocery stores.

Muslims generally embrace the Canadian education system and integrate easily into the existing system. Even though there are Islamic primary and secondary schools in the country, the vast majority of Muslims prefer to send their children to public schools, or to private schools if they can afford it. Receiving a secular and formal education at public institutions, Muslim children go to Islamic courses at the weekends and during the holidays. It is through this means that Islamic foundations and associations provide children with religious knowledge. In this sense, Muslims are quite experienced in the organization and management of NGOs. Muslims in Canada have had gradually increasing interaction with one another and thus developed better skills for organizing themselves. It seems that Canadian Muslims will succeed in having their voice heard more loudly in years to come.

As a conclusion, the levels of integration and the economic and social status of Muslims who have settled in Canada seems to be on the rise. An educated, informed and the wealthy Muslim community is being formed in Canada. However, while the level of well-being is on the rise on the one hand, on the other, the values and traditions that earlier generations wanted to preserve are being lost. That is, despite being wealthy and educated, the young generation has relinquished most of its religious and cultural ties. Having embraced Canadian culture, this new generation know very little of their parents' mother tongues, or about the culture and history of their people. Lacking the necessary trained personnel and curricula, NGOs cannot do much about preserving these values. These young people who spend eight hours a day at school and the rest of the day in front of a television or online have started being increasingly assimilated.

## **Political Situation**

Just like the USA, Australia and Switzerland, Canada is a federal country. Therefore, in addition to the central government, each province has its own government. While the central government develops policies regarding all components of the state, provincial governments can develop policies towards their own goals. The corresponding areas of responsibility for the federal and provincial governments have been defined in the constitution of 1867. The official head of Canada is the Queen of England. The Queen is represented by governors general at the federal level and by lieutenant governors at the provincial level. The state of Canada is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy. In contemporary Canada, the elected federal government comes from the right and represents the neoconservative wing. Giving open support to Israeli and American policies in recent years, the government has begun to divert from Canada's traditionally peaceful and nonaligned attitude towards international politics. The Armenian Genocide was recognized officially by Canada in 2004 and is taught as part of the Canadian curriculum. Jewish, Italian and Armenian lobbies are better organized than Muslim groups and have more influence on Canadian politics. Therefore Muslims do not have much of a say on domestic or international policies. Attitudes towards Muslims were not changed by 9/11. Even though a portion of the population became suspicious and uneasy, this did not evolve into a general attitude and, on the contrary, interest in Islam increased after the events.

Canada's political system protects individual freedoms and allows all types of ethnic or religious organization as long as it is peaceful. Founding a new party is possible as long as it is in accordance with the Canada Elections Act, but founding a religious party is strictly prohibited. Therefore Muslims often prefer to join existing parties and assume certain roles within these parties. Muslim groups have only recently become active in Canadian politics. They have all the same rights as other groups but, unfortunately, they are not as well-organized when compared. This newly-started process advances slowly. To summarize, Canada is known as a country of freedoms both by Muslims and other groups.

Canadian Muslims are generally a mobile group, enjoying travel both within and outside Canada. At the same time, they can easily change their state of residence and move to another for job opportunities. Every Canadian citizen has the right to cross the US border with their passport and to search for opportunities on the other side of the border. However, Muslims generally prefer the opposite course and migrate from America to Canada. In addition to this, Muslims enjoy visiting their home countries and save up money to spend time there, especially in the summer. However, younger generations have started to prefer going to different tourist destinations instead of visiting their homeland. The main reason for this is the gradual deterioration of relations with relatives back home and the fact that they lose touch with their home countries. While the first generation's parents and the majority of their family stayed in the home country, the families, friends and social circles of the new generation are already in Canada. Therefore the young generations feel less of a need to visit.

Muslims in Canada have the freedom of worship. They can comfortably perform Friday prayers. Preaching can take place in any language depending on the needs of the community and can deal with any subject. Even though the call to prayer is not allowed, building minarets is. Therefore Muslims need to remember prayer times without hearing the call to prayer. Muslims are also free to spend Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr as they please. Those who work usually take time off and, since employers are accustomed to this, they usually show understanding. Sacrifices are carried out in farms and village inhabitants do not find anything strange in this Muslim tradition. After all, Eid al-Adha presents them with an important opportunity as well. In short, just as they have the freedom to dress as they please, Muslims in Canada also have the freedom of worship.

## **Problems Experienced by Muslims**

It can be said that Muslims in Canada are experiencing a new era which began in the 1990s and gained momentum in the 2000s. Economic and social comfort on top of familiarity and affinity with the local population has caused Muslims' ties to their own communities to dissolve. People who previously stood together to preserve their languages, cultures and religions are now falling apart. Parents have unfortunately been unable to keep up with the environment in which the new generation are growing up and are failing to provide better alternatives for them. It is clear that future generations will experience serious problems communicating with their grandparents and even parents. It would be wrong to say that those members of Canadian society who are familiar with Muslims and their lifestyle feel enmity or hatred toward Muslims. Tolerance and understanding are more widespread in large metropolises like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver, where people from many different origins interact. In areas where immigrants are not present, however, outsiders are regarded with suspicion. Therefore, it can be said that the less interaction one has with Muslims, the more distrust and anxiety one feels. This holds true for any outsider who looks different, not just for Muslims. This is because the Canadian population resorts to television as a source of information. Canadians have been influenced heavily by the propaganda following 9/11 and felt, even if only for a certain period, that their security was under threat. Despite the harsh reactions in those years, the hatred seems to have subsided and Muslims are now seen in a better light. Canadians today have quite a good opinion of Muslims.

We cannot speak of widespread discrimination in Canada. Nevertheless, some surveys reveal there is hidden discrimination. For example, when a black person wants to rent a house, they are likely to be rejected by the owners who make up various excuses. Likewise, some companies prefer not to employ people wearing headscarves or refuse to employ people because of their names. This is in spite of the fact that the Canadian Human Rights Act includes the following: "All individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability or other special cases." As Canada is a multicultural society, the law is very clear and sensitive when it comes to such issues. After all, tolerance and understanding are essential for such a mixed society to keep coexisting.

Canadian Muslims are generally moderate people. Even though there are some radical groups, they have never been strongly active and have minimal popular support. This makes Canada one of the places where Muslims can live most comfortably. Muslims in Canada have numerous opportunities in terms of their ability to organize themselves, job opportunities, and general welfare. Enjoying the freedoms of thought and movement, Muslims have easily become part of the system and have been able to lead the lifestyles they want. Even the sight of a Muslim praying on the grass at a roadside rest area is no longer surprising, because Canadians are used to it. To summarize the situation of Muslims living in Canada, it is a really positive picture. Every Canadian citizen is treated equally before the law and everyone is identified as Canadian. Every ethnic and religious group can found an organization and engage in cultural and traditional activities there in any way they please. As long as you remain within the boundaries of the law, you cannot run into problems with the Canadian state. The number of people who experience unjust treatment in this respect is very low. Canada is a place where Muslims can easily preserve their religion, language, culture and traditions. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind that the process of assimilation will continue over time and that future generations will be affected by it.

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