ISLAM IN CYPRUS: Navigating the Complexities of Ottoman-Era Traditions and Global Islamic Influences within a Transnational Context

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Abstract: This study explores the complexities of Islam in Cyprus, focusing on the interplay between local and transnational Islamic identities within modern Muslim societies. Utilizing a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on secondary data from academic sources to analyze how these identities influence religious practices among Muslim communities in Cyprus. The thematic analysis reveals significant patterns in the historical evolution of Islam on the island, highlighting the diversity within its Muslim population and the impact of both textual and contextual factors on their practices. Findings indicate a dynamic interaction between local traditions, particularly Ottoman customs, and global Islamic influences, including transnational movements. This synthesis results in a unique Islamic identity that integrates historical continuity with contemporary adaptations. The insights gained contribute to a deeper understanding of how Muslim societies navigate their religious practices amidst local and global contexts, thereby enriching contemporary Islamic studies and discussions on religious integration in secular states.

Keywords: Islam in Cyprus, modern Muslim societies, transnational context, Islamic identity, religious integration

Introduction

Islam in Cyprus occupies a distinctive position within the broader landscape of contemporary Islamic studies, where the complexities of modern Muslim societies are increasingly shaped by both local traditions and transnational influences. As a country straddling the borders of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Cyprus presents a unique context for examining how Islam interacts with diverse cultural and political landscapes.[1] The island's Muslim community, primarily composed of Turkish Cypriots, has been shaped by centuries of historical developments, from Ottoman rule to British colonialism, and now faces the challenges of globalization and the pressures of secularism.[2] This study delves into the intricate dynamics of how Islam is practised and perceived in Cyprus, aiming to unravel how local and global forces converge to shape the religious identity of its Muslim communities.

The specific problem under study is how Muslim communities in Cyprus navigate their religious identity within a predominantly secular society while being influenced by transnational Islamic movements. This issue is of particular importance given the growing interconnectedness of the Muslim world through global communication networks, migration, and international religious organizations. Previous studies have primarily focused on the historical and political aspects of Islam in Cyprus, often neglecting the contemporary challenges posed by globalization and transnationalism.[1-3] By addressing this gap, the current study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the religious identity of Cypriot Muslims in the modern era.

This research builds on the foundational work of scholars like Mehmet Ali Akinci , who has provided an in-depth analysis of the historical development of Islam in Cyprus, particularly during the Ottoman period. Akinci's research highlights the

enduring impact of Ottoman rule on the island's Muslim community, laying the groundwork for understanding the historical context of Islam in Cyprus.[3] However, while Akinci's work offers valuable insights into the past, it does not fully address the contemporary issues that arise from the interaction between local Islamic practices and global influences. This study seeks to expand on Akinci's findings by exploring how these historical legacies continue to shape, and are reshaped by, modern transnational Islamic movements.

In addition to historical analyses, the study also considers the work of Mete Hatay, who has extensively examined the political dimensions of Islam in Cyprus, particularly within the Turkish Cypriot community. Hatay's research focuses on the identity struggles of Turkish Cypriots and the role of Islam in their quest for political recognition and cultural preservation.[4] While Hatay's work is instrumental in understanding the political context of Islam in Cyprus, it tends to overlook the social and religious aspects of Muslim life on the island. This study aims to address this oversight by providing a more holistic view that encompasses the social, religious, and political dimensions of Islamic identity in Cyprus.

The relevance of this study is further underscored by the increasing impact of transnational Islamic movements on local Muslim communities. As globalization continues to dissolve traditional boundaries, the influence of global Islamic networks on local practices has become a critical area of inquiry. Scholars like Jocelyne Cesari have emphasized the importance of studying the role of religion in public life within the broader context of globalization, pointing to the complex interactions between local and global Islamic practices.[5] This research contributes to this growing body of literature by focusing on the unique case of Cyprus, where local traditions and transnational influences intersect in complex ways.

One of the significant contributions of this study lies in its exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by Muslim communities in Cyprus as they attempt to maintain their religious identity within a predominantly secular environment. By focusing on the everyday realities of these communities, the research offers a nuanced understanding of how global Islamic trends influence, and are influenced by, local Islamic practices. This perspective not only provides insights into the specific case of Cyprus but also contributes to broader discussions on the impact of globalization on Muslim societies worldwide.

Additionally, this study addresses the broader question of how historical legacies and contemporary global dynamics influence Islamic practices in Cyprus. By examining both the historical context and the contemporary challenges faced by Muslim communities, the research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors shaping Islamic identity in Cyprus. This approach not only adds depth to the field of contemporary Islamic studies but also highlights the complexities of navigating religious identity in a rapidly changing global environment.

Ultimately, the primary aim of this study is to explore how Muslim communities in Cyprus navigate their religious identity within the context of both local traditions and transnational Islamic influences. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following key questions: How do historical legacies and contemporary global dynamics influence Islamic practices in Cyprus? What challenges and opportunities do Muslim communities face in preserving their religious identity in a predominantly secular society? How does the interaction between local and transnational Islamic identities shape the future of Islam in Cyprus? By addressing these questions, the study contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamics of modern Muslim societies in a globalized world.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is a qualitative approach based on secondary data. This approach was chosen to explore the intricate dynamics of Islam in Cyprus, particularly how it intersects with both local and transnational influences. The study employs a case study design, focusing on Cyprus as a specific context where the global and local dimensions of Islam converge. The research utilizes a library-based method, focusing on written secondary sources to explore the research question.

Data for this research was gathered from a wide array of secondary sources, including academic journal articles, books, government reports, policy documents, and relevant media coverage. These sources were carefully selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the historical, political, and social context of Islam in Cyprus. The analysis involved a thematic review of the literature, where key themes and patterns related to the **practice** of Islam in Cyprus were identified and explored.

The analysis was further informed by relevant theoretical frameworks in Islamic studies and international relations, such as transnationalism, globalization, and identity politics. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives with empirical data from secondary sources, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities faced by Muslim communities in Cyprus. The reliance on secondary data also allowed for a broader historical and contextual analysis, which is critical for understanding the evolving nature of Islam in Cyprus within the broader Islamic world.

Despite the limitations inherent in using secondary data, such as the lack of direct engagement with the community, this methodology provides a robust foundation for exploring the multifaceted nature of Islam in Cyprus. The findings from this

research contribute to the ongoing discourse on the interaction between local and transnational forces in shaping modern Muslim societies, particularly in contexts marked by historical division and contemporary global influences.

Results and Discussion
Historical Context of Islam in Cyprus

Islam was introduced to Cyprus during the period of Ottoman rule, which began in 1571 and lasted until 1878. The Ottoman conquest of Cyprus was part of a broader expansion of the Ottoman Empire across the Eastern Mediterranean, and it marked a significant shift in the island's religious and cultural landscape. Before Ottoman rule, Cyprus was predominantly Christian, with the Greek Orthodox Church holding a central position in society. The arrival of the Ottomans introduced Islam as a major religious force on the island, with the establishment of mosques, Islamic institutions, and the settlement of Muslim populations, primarily of Turkish origin. This period laid the groundwork for the enduring presence of Islam in Cyprus and its integration into the island's social fabric.[6]

The Ottomans implemented a millet system in Cyprus, which allowed religious communities to govern themselves under their own laws in matters of personal status and religion. The Muslim population, under the millet system, was organized into their community, with religious leaders playing a central role in governance and legal matters. This system not only facilitated the establishment of Islam in Cyprus but also helped maintain a degree of religious coexistence between Muslims and Christians on the island. The millet system, however, also reinforced religious identities and contributed to the development of distinct communal boundaries that would later influence the island's socio-political dynamics.[7]

During the Ottoman period, the Muslim population in Cyprus grew significantly through both the settlement of Turkish Muslims and the conversion of local Christians. This population was primarily concentrated in urban centres such as Nicosia, Famagusta, and Larnaca, where mosques and other Islamic institutions were established. The architectural legacy of this period is still visible today, with numerous Ottoman-era mosques, baths, and other structures dotting the landscape of Cyprus. The spread of Islam during this time was not merely a result of state policies but also involved complex interactions between different religious communities, with some locals adopting Islam for various social and economic reasons.[8]

The end of Ottoman rule and the subsequent British administration of Cyprus from 1878 to 1960 marked another significant period in the history of Islam on the island. Under British rule, the Muslim community in Cyprus experienced both continuity and change. The British maintained the millet system to some extent, allowing Muslims to retain their religious institutions and practices. However, the transition from Ottoman to British rule also brought about changes in the socio-political status of the Muslim community, as the island's governance shifted from a Muslim-majority empire to a predominantly Christian colonial administration. This period saw the gradual decline of the Muslim population's influence, as well as increasing tensions between the Greek and Turkish communities on the island.[9]

The legacy of the Ottoman period in Cyprus is still evident in the island's religious demographics and cultural heritage. Today, the Turkish Cypriot community, which constitutes a significant portion of the Muslim population in Cyprus, traces its roots back to the Ottoman settlers. The preservation of Ottoman-era mosques, cultural practices, and religious traditions within this community reflects the enduring impact of the

Ottoman period on the development of Islam in Cyprus. However, the legacy of this period is also intertwined with the broader political conflict between the Greek and Turkish communities, particularly in the context of the island's division following the events of 1974.[10]

Figure 1. Map Showing the Greek and Turkish-controlled Areas of Cyprus

Source: The Turkish Arms Embargo – Part I. https://www.byrdcenter.org/blog/the-turkish-arms-embargo-part-i

The map above illustrates the division of Cyprus into Greek and Turkish-controlled areas, highlighting the geopolitical complexities of the island. The southern part of Cyprus, known as the Republic of Cyprus, is predominantly controlled by Greek Cypriots, while the northern part is controlled by Turkish Cypriots and recognized as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) only by Turkey. A United Nations Buffer Zone, known as the "Green Line," separates the two areas, running through the capital, Nicosia (Lefkosia/Lefkoᵃa), which is itself divided. The map also shows British Sovereign Base Areas on the island, which are remnants of the colonial era. Significant geographical features include the Troodos and Kyrenia mountain ranges, along with key cities like Limassol, Larnaca, and Famagusta.

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This division remains a focal point of tension in the Eastern Mediterranean, reflecting ongoing issues of international recognition, sovereignty, and conflict resolution.

The division of Cyprus into the predominantly Greek Cypriot south and the Turkish Cypriot north in 1974 has had profound implications for the Muslim community on the island. In the north, which the Turkish Cypriot administration controls, Islam plays a central role in the cultural and religious life of the community. The TRNC has maintained close ties with Turkey, leading to the continued influence of Turkish Islamic practices and institutions. In contrast, the Muslim population in the south, which is much smaller, has had to navigate a different set of challenges, including maintaining their religious identity in a predominantly Christian environment.

Contemporary Muslim Communities in Cyprus

The contemporary Muslim communities in Cyprus are characterized by a complex and multifaceted composition, reflecting the island's diverse historical and socio-political landscape. The largest and most established Muslim group in Cyprus are the Turkish Cypriots, who are descendants of the Ottoman settlers and have maintained a distinct cultural and religious identity for centuries. Turkish Cypriots primarily practice Sunni Islam, with a strong adherence to cultural traditions influenced by their Ottoman heritage. Despite their deep-rooted presence, Turkish Cypriots face challenges in navigating their identity within a predominantly Christian society, particularly in the context of the island's ongoing division and the political tensions between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities.[11]

In addition to the Turkish Cypriots, the Muslim population in Cyprus has been significantly diversified by the influx of immigrants from various Muslim-majority countries. Below is a summary of these communities:

Table 1. Composition of Muslim Communities in Cyprus

Community	Estimated Population	Characteristics
Turkish Cypriots	Approximately 391,000 in the northern area; majority are Sunni Muslims	Descendants of Ottoman settlers, primarily Sunni Muslims with a significant Sufi influence.
Alevi Muslims	Approximately 10,000	Immigrants and descendants from Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origins, practicing Alevism.
Immigrant Muslims	Not specified	Recent immigrants from countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Pakistan, contributing to the religious and cultural diversity.

Source: U.S. State Department. (2023). International Religious Freedom Reports: Cyprus. Retrieved from https://www.state.gov/reports/

Table 1 provides an overview of the different Muslim groups residing on the island. It highlights the largest group, Turkish Cypriots, who practice Sunni Islam and maintain a strong cultural identity influenced by their Ottoman heritage. Additionally, the table reveals the growing diversity within the Muslim population due to immigration from various Muslim-majority countries such as Syria, Lebanon, and Pakistan.

These immigrantshave introduced new cultural and religious practices to the island. The arrival of these immigrant communities has not only increased the numerical strength of the Muslim population but also added to the religious and cultural diversity within the Muslim community itself. These groups often maintain strong transnational ties with their countries of origin, which influences their religious practices and communal life in Cyprus. The presence of these diverse immigrant communities has also highlighted the challenges of integration and the complexities

of maintaining a cohesive Muslim identity in a predominantly Christian and ethnically divided society.[12]

Converts to Islam represent another significant group within the contemporary Muslim communities in Cyprus. Although relatively small in number, these converts often face unique challenges as they navigate their newfound religious identity in a society where Islam is not the dominant faith. Converts are usually drawn to Islam for various personal, spiritual, or intellectual reasons, and their experiences of conversion can vary widely. Some may find support within the existing Muslim community,[4] while others may encounter social isolation or misunderstanding from both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations.[13] The process of conversion often involves a complex negotiation of identity, where converts must reconcile their new religious beliefs with their previous cultural and social affiliations.

The diversity within the Muslim communities in Cyprus is further complicated by differences in religious practices and interpretations of Islam. For example, while Turkish Cypriots generally follow the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, immigrant communities may adhere to other schools of thought or even different branches of Islam, such as Shia or Sufi traditions. These differences can sometimes lead to tensions within the Muslim community, particularly when it comes to the organization of religious events, the management of mosques, and the representation of the community in broader societal and political contexts.[14]

The socio-political context of Cyprus, marked by its division and the influence of both Greek and Turkish nationalisms, plays a significant role in shaping the identities of Muslim communities on the island. Turkish Cypriots, for instance, often find their religious identity intertwined with their ethnic and national identity, leading to a unique form of religious expression that is distinct from other Muslim communities.

This intertwining of religion and ethnicity is less pronounced among immigrant Muslims and converts, who may prioritize religious identity over ethnic or national affiliations.[15]

The relationship between the Muslim communities and the broader Cypriot society is also shaped by issues of discrimination and marginalization. Turkish Cypriots, immigrants, and converts alike may face prejudice or stereotyping in various aspects of life, from employment to social interactions.[16] These experiences of discrimination can reinforce a sense of otherness and contribute to the internal cohesion of Muslim communities, as members seek solidarity and support within their religious group. However, they can also hinder the integration of Muslims into the broader Cypriot society and exacerbate social divisions.

Efforts to bridge these divides have been made by various community organizations and religious leaders who advocate for interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding. Such initiatives aim to foster a more inclusive society where the diversity of religious and cultural identities is recognized and respected. These efforts are crucial in addressing the challenges faced by Muslim communities in Cyprus and in promoting peaceful coexistence on the island.[17]

In conclusion, the contemporary Muslim communities in Cyprus are characterized by their diversity and the complex ways in which they navigate their identities within a predominantly Christian society. The challenges they face, from integration and representation to issues of discrimination, reflect the broader socio-political dynamics of Cyprus. Understanding these communities requires a nuanced approach that takes into account the historical context, the influence of transnational ties, and the ongoing negotiations of identity within a divided society.

Textual vs. Contextual Approaches in Islamic Practices

The examination of Islamic practices in Cyprus reveals a dynamic interplay between traditional Islamic texts and the contextual realities that shape religious life on the island. Traditional Islamic texts, including the Quran and Hadith, serve as foundational sources for religious practices among Muslims in Cyprus. These texts guide rituals, moral behaviour, and social interactions, providing a framework for understanding religious obligations and the ethical dimensions of daily life. However, the interpretation and application of these texts are influenced by the unique socio-political and cultural context of Cyprus, which adds layers of complexity to religious practices.

In the context of Cyprus, the interpretation of Islamic texts often reflects the historical and political conditions of the island. For Turkish Cypriots, who form the majority of the Muslim population, the Ottoman legacy plays a significant role in shaping their religious identity. The Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, which was the official legal school of the Ottoman Empire, continues to influence religious practices and legal interpretations among Turkish Cypriots. However, this traditional interpretation is often modified to accommodate the realities of living in a predominantly Christian society with its own distinct cultural and legal traditions. This results in a unique blend of Islamic and local customs that is specific to the Cypriot context.[18]

The contextual realities of Cyprus, particularly the ongoing political division and the influence of secular nationalism, also affect how Islamic texts are interpreted and practised. For example, Turkish Cypriots often emphasize aspects of Islam that align with their national identity and political aspirations, while downplaying those that might conflict with the secular nature of the TRNC. This selective interpretation of Islamic texts

highlights the complex relationship between religion and politics in Cyprus, where religious practices are not only a matter of personal faith but also a reflection of broader socio-political dynamics.[19]

Immigrant Muslim communities in Cyprus, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, bring their interpretations of Islamic texts, which are shaped by their experiences in their home countries. These interpretations often differ from those of the Turkish Cypriots, leading to a plurality of religious practices within the Muslim community. For instance, Shia Muslims from Lebanon or Syria may follow different rituals and religious authorities than Sunni Turkish Cypriots, reflecting the diversity of Islamic traditions within the island.[20] This diversity poses challenges for communal unity, as different groups navigate their religious identities in a context that is often not conducive to religious pluralism.

The contextual approach to Islamic practices in Cyprus is also evident in the way Muslims engage with issues of cultural integration and interfaith relations. The need to coexist with the predominantly Christian Greek Cypriots and the broader European context has led to a pragmatic approach to religious practice, where the emphasis is often placed on social harmony and mutual respect rather than strict adherence to traditional interpretations of Islamic texts. This approach is supported by community leaders and religious authorities who advocate for a contextual understanding of Islam that is sensitive to the realities of living in a multicultural and multi-religious society.[21]

International relations further complicate the interpretation and practice of Islam in Cyprus. The island's strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean and its historical ties to both Europe and the Middle East make it a crossroads of various political and religious influences. The involvement of international

actors, such as Turkey, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN), in the Cyprus conflict and its resolution has implications for how Islam is practised and perceived on the island. Turkish Cypriots, for example, may look to Turkey for religious guidance and support, while also navigating their relationship with the EU, which promotes secularism and human rights.[22]

In addition, the global discourse on Islam, particularly in the context of the war on terror and the rise of Islamophobia, influences how Muslims in Cyprus perceive and practice their religion. The need to counter negative stereotypes and assert a positive Muslim identity in a globalized world often leads to a re-examination of traditional texts and the promotion of a contextual understanding of Islam that is compatible with modern values of democracy, human rights, and social justice. This global-local interaction highlights the transnational dimensions of Islamic practices in Cyprus and the importance of context in shaping religious identity.[23]

Thus, the practice of Islam in Cyprus is characterized by a tension between the textual authority of traditional Islamic sources and the contextual realities of living in a divided, multicultural, and politically sensitive environment. This tension is navigated by Muslims in Cyprus through a variety of interpretative strategies that reflect the diversity of the Muslim community and the complex socio-political landscape of the island. Understanding these dynamics is essential for a comprehensive analysis of Islamic practices in Cyprus and their implications for the broader study of Islam in contemporary society.

Islam in Cypriot Politics and Society

Islam plays a nuanced role in the political landscape of Cyprus, shaped by the island's complex history of inter-communal relations and its unique governance structure. The majority of Cypriot Muslims are Turkish Cypriots, whose religious identity

has been significantly influenced by the island's division since 1974. This division has created two distinct political entities: the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus in the south and the self-declared TRNC in the north, which is recognized only by Turkey. Within this context, Islam intersects with politics, law, and governance in ways that reflect both historical legacies and contemporary challenges.

In Northern Cyprus, Islam is intricately linked to Turkish Cypriot identity and nationalistic sentiments. The TRNC, while secular in its official policies, uses Islam as a cultural marker that distinguishes Turkish Cypriots from Greek Cypriots. This instrumentalization of Islam is evident in the state's promotion of religious education and the construction of mosques, often funded by Turkey. These efforts aim to reinforce a distinct Turkish-Islamic identity among Turkish Cypriots, which serves both as a means of consolidating internal unity and as a political statement against the Greek Cypriot south.[24]

The secular framework of the TRNC means that while Islam is culturally significant, it does not play a direct role in governance or law. The legal system in Northern Cyprus is based on British common law, with religious matters largely confined to the private sphere. However, the presence of Islamic institutions, such as the Religious Affairs Department (Diyanet), indicates the state's recognition of religion as a component of societal identity. The Diyanet, closely affiliated with its counterpart in Turkey, oversees religious activities and the administration of mosques, reflecting the influence of Turkish religious policies on the TRNC.[25]

In contrast, the role of Islam in the Republic of Cyprus is more subdued, given that the Muslim population in the south is a minority. The Republic of Cyprus is a secular state, and its legal system does not incorporate Islamic law. However, the

state does recognize the religious rights of Muslims, including the Turkish Cypriots who reside in the south, as well as immigrants and other Muslim minorities. This recognition is manifested in the preservation of historical mosques and the provision of spaces for religious practice, albeit within a predominantly Christian society.[26]

The inter-communal dynamics in Cyprus also shape the role of Islam in politics. In the north, the political use of Islam is sometimes seen as a tool for differentiating the Turkish Cypriot community from Greek Cypriots, reinforcing the division between the two communities. However, this differentiation is not without controversy. Some Turkish Cypriots view the increasing influence of Turkey, particularly through religious channels, as a threat to their secular traditions and autonomy. This tension reflects broader concerns about the erosion of secularism in the TRNC and the potential implications for Turkish Cypriot identity and governance.[27]

Islam in Cypriot politics also interacts with broader regional and international dynamics. The island's strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean and its historical ties to both Europe and the Middle East make it a focal point for various geopolitical interests. Turkey's role as a protector of Turkish Cypriots and its influence on the TRNC's religious policies is a significant factor in the island's politics. At the same time, the Republic of Cyprus's membership in the EU and its alignment with Western secular norms position it within a different geopolitical sphere, where Islam is not a dominant political force but is part of a broader discourse on multiculturalism and religious freedom.[28]

In navigating their religious identity within a secular state framework, Cypriot Muslims, particularly Turkish Cypriots, face the challenge of balancing their Islamic heritage with the realities of living in a divided and politically sensitive environment.

This balancing act is further complicated by the presence of a diverse Muslim population, including immigrants from different cultural backgrounds, who bring their interpretations of Islam to the island.[29] The diversity within the Muslim community in Cyprus adds another layer of complexity to the role of Islam in politics, as different groups may have varying expectations of how religion should interact with the state.

Ultimately, the role of Islam in Cypriot politics and society is a reflection of the island's unique history and geopolitical context. While Islam is a significant cultural and identity marker for Turkish Cypriots, its influence on governance and law is mediated by the secular nature of the TRNC and the Republic of Cyprus. The ongoing tensions between secularism and religious identity in Northern Cyprus, along with the broader geopolitical dynamics at play, ensure that the role of Islam in Cypriot politics remains a contested and evolving issue.

Transnational Islamic Influences

Transnational Islamic influences have played a significant role in shaping the religious landscape of Muslim communities in Cyprus. The island's unique geopolitical position and its divided status have made it a focal point for various transnational Islamic movements and ideologies, which have had both unifying and divisive effects on the local Muslim population. These influences are primarily driven by Turkey's strategic interests, as well as the broader global Islamic networks that seek to assert their religious and political ideologies in this contested space.

Turkey's role in shaping Islamic identity in Northern Cyprus cannot be understated. The Turkish government, through its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), has been instrumental in promoting a particular brand of Sunni Islam that aligns with the state's vision. This influence is evident in the construction

of mosques, the organization of religious education, and the funding of religious activities in Northern Cyprus. The Diyanet's presence in the TRNC reflects Turkey's broader strategy of using religion as a soft power tool to maintain influence over the Turkish Cypriot community and to assert its dominance in the region.[30]

The impact of global Islamic networks on Cyprus's Muslim communities is also significant. These networks, which include various transnational Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism, and the Gülen movement, have introduced different interpretations and practices of Islam to the island. While these movements often share common religious foundations, their differing political and ideological goals have sometimes led to tensions within the Muslim community. For example, the presence of the Gülen movement in Cyprus, particularly through educational institutions, has sparked controversy and has been met with resistance from both Turkish Cypriot authorities and other Islamic groups who view it as a threat to traditional religious practices.[31]

The influence of these transnational Islamic movements has also raised concerns about the authenticity of local religious practices. In a globalized world, where religious ideas and practices are increasingly shared across borders, maintaining a distinct Islamic identity that is rooted in local traditions and culture becomes challenging. This tension is particularly evident in the differing approaches to religious practices among Turkish Cypriots and immigrant Muslim communities. While Turkish Cypriots tend to adhere to a more secularized version of Islam, immigrant communities often bring with them more conservative interpretations, leading to a complex interplay of religious identities on the island.[32]

The challenge of maintaining religious authenticity is further compounded by the political and social context of Cyprus. The island's division has created a situation where religious identity is often intertwined with political identity, particularly in the north. In this context, the influence of transnational Islamic movements can be seen as both a source of religious revival and a tool for political mobilization. However, this dual role can also lead to conflicts, as different groups vie for control over religious institutions and the direction of religious life in Northern Cyprus.[33]

In addition to Turkey's influence and the presence of global Islamic networks, the role of international Islamic organizations should also be considered. Organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) have sought to support Muslim communities in Cyprus, particularly in terms of advocating for their rights and providing humanitarian assistance.[34] However, the involvement of these organizations also brings with it the risk of external political agendas influencing local religious dynamics. This can create a situation where the needs and aspirations of the local Muslim population are overshadowed by broader geopolitical considerations.

The interplay of these various transnational influences has resulted in a diverse and sometimes fragmented Muslim community in Cyprus. While some groups have embraced the opportunities for religious revival and engagement with the global Islamic community, others have resisted these external influences, seeking to preserve their unique religious identity.[35] This diversity within the Muslim community reflects the broader complexities of navigating religious life in a globalized world, where local traditions and global influences are constantly in dialogue.[36]

Overall, the impact of transnational Islamic influences on Cyprus's Muslim communities is a reflection of the island's broader geopolitical context. As Cyprus continues to navigate its divided status and its place within the international community, the role of Islam will remain a key factor in shaping its future.

Challenges and Opportunities for Islamic Discourse

The discourse surrounding Islam in Cyprus is shaped by both challenges and opportunities that reflect the complexities of the island's socio-political landscape. One of the primary challenges faced by Muslim communities in Cyprus is the issue of religious freedom. Despite constitutional guarantees, there have been instances where the religious rights of Muslims, particularly those in the south, have been compromised.[37] Restrictions on the construction of mosques, the maintenance of existing religious sites, and the lack of state funding for Islamic institutions are some of the issues that have been highlighted by various reports. These challenges are further exacerbated by the political divide on the island, which often hinders the ability of Muslims to practice their religion freely in both the north and the south. This situation reflects a broader struggle for religious minorities in Cyprus to assert their rights within a framework that is predominantly secular and influenced by the majority Christian Orthodox population.[38]

Integration is another significant challenge for the Muslim communities in Cyprus. Turkish Cypriots, who make up the majority of the Muslim population, have historically been marginalized, both politically and socially. This marginalization is reflected in their underrepresentation in political institutions, as well as in the broader public sphere. Additionally, the influx of Muslim immigrants, particularly from the Middle East and South Asia, has added a new layer of complexity to the integration process. These immigrant communities often face discrimination and

xenophobia, further complicating their ability to integrate into Cypriot society. The challenges of integration are not just socio-economic but also cultural, as these communities strive to maintain their religious identity while adapting to a new and often hostile environment.[39]

Representation is another critical issue for Muslims in Cyprus. The political divide on the island has resulted in a situation where Turkish Cypriots, who are predominantly Muslim, have limited representation in the government of the Republic of Cyprus. This lack of representation extends to the broader public sphere, where the voices of Muslim communities are often marginalized or ignored.[40] This underrepresentation has significant implications for the ability of Muslims to influence policy decisions that affect their lives, particularly in areas such as education, religious freedom, and social services. The lack of political representation also means that Muslim communities have limited avenues for addressing grievances and advocating for their rights.[41]

Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic Islamic discourse within the broader Cypriot society. One of the key opportunities lies in the potential for interfaith dialogue.[42] Cyprus has a long history of intercommunal relations, and there are existing frameworks for promoting dialogue between different religious communities. These frameworks could be leveraged to foster greater understanding and cooperation between Muslim and Christian communities on the island. Interfaith dialogue could also provide a platform for addressing some of the challenges faced by Muslims in Cyprus, such as religious freedom and integration, by promoting mutual respect and tolerance.[43]

Another opportunity lies in the potential for greater civic engagement by Muslim communities in Cyprus. By participating

more actively in the political and social life of the island, Muslims can work to ensure that their voices are heard and that their rights are protected. This could involve greater participation in local government, as well as in civil society organizations that advocate for the rights of religious minorities.[44] Civic engagement could also help to address some of the challenges of integration, by providing a platform for Muslims to contribute to the broader society and to build bridges with other communities.[45]

The role of education is also crucial in shaping the future of Islamic discourse in Cyprus. Educational institutions can play a key role in promoting a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of Islam, one that is rooted in both the textual traditions of the religion and the contextual realities of Cypriot society.[46] By fostering a more critical and reflective approach to Islamic education, schools and universities can help equip young Muslims with the tools they need to navigate the challenges of living in a secular and pluralistic society. This could involve the inclusion of courses on Islamic thought and practice in the curriculum, as well as the promotion of intercultural and interfaith education.[47]

The media also has a significant role to play in shaping the discourse around Islam in Cyprus. How Muslim communities are portrayed in the media can have a profound impact on public perceptions and attitudes. There is a need for more balanced and nuanced coverage of issues related to Islam and Muslims in Cyprus, one that goes beyond stereotypes and focuses on the diversity and complexity of these communities. By providing a platform for Muslim voices and perspectives, the media can contribute to a more informed and inclusive public discourse.[48]

At its core, while Muslim communities in Cyprus face significant challenges, there are also opportunities for fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic Islamic discourse. By addressing

issues of religious freedom, integration, and representation, and by leveraging the potential of interfaith dialogue, civic engagement, education, and the media, it is possible to create a more inclusive and tolerant society in which all communities can thrive.

Conclusion

This study examined the complexities of modern Muslim societies in Cyprus within a transnational context, focusing on the interaction between Islam and broader socio-political dynamics. The findings highlight that the practice of Islam in Cyprus is shaped by both internal factors, such as the island's political division and socio-economic challenges, and external influences, including Turkey and the EU's roles. While Muslim communities face challenges like religious freedom constraints and integration difficulties, opportunities exist for enhancing Islamic discourse through interfaith dialogue, civic engagement, education, and media representation.

The implications of these findings underscore the importance of fostering inclusive practices to address integration and representation challenges. Interfaith dialogue and educational strategies emerge as pivotal tools for bridging divides and promoting mutual understanding, while increased civic participation and improved media portrayals could significantly enhance the visibility and agency of Muslim communities in Cyprus.

By reflecting both continuity and change, this study contributes to the broader discourse on Muslim societies in transnational contexts. Future research should delve deeper into the evolving political, social, and international factors that shape these dynamics, offering insights applicable to other divided and pluralistic societies worldwide.

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