

Belgium

Significant role for Muslims

Brussels - Nour-eddine Saudi

One of the main characteristics of the Kingdom of Belgium is the diversity of its ethnic groups. It is made up of two main ethnic groups, French speaking Walloons and Flemish speaking inhabitants. In addition, Belgium has an important Muslim community 85 percent of which is made up of Moroccans and Turks. It also includes Tunisians, Algerians, Palestinians, Iranians, Senegalese, Egyptians, Albanians and others.



The symbol of the European Union. معلمة "أتوميوم" رمز الاتحاد الأوروبي ببروكسيل.



Independence Arch in Brussels. قوس الاستقلال بحديقة "لو سانتونير" ببروكسيل.

In 1988, the size of the community prompted the Belgium authorities to accept the representation of Muslims within the "The Executive Committee for Muslims". After the last elections a woman of Moroccan origin became a government minister. This is a historical precedent in Europe and a source of pride for the Moroccan, Arab and Islamic communities since it is a clear recognition of the vital role this community plays in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the country.

Feeling at home

Forty percent of Belgian Muslims live in Brussels a city of about a million people, the capital of the European Union. They are concentrated in eight suburbs: Anderlecht, Sant Joost, and Lakens. If you visit these suburbs all you see and hear will make you feel as if you are in the Middle East: the shops, the music, the smell of food etc are a reminder of Tunis, Cairo and Casablanca.

Due to the size of the Muslim community in Brussels, the Belgian capital now has more than 20 mosques, including the well known Mosque of Brussels, Al-Khalil and Al-Taouba.

The Brussels mosque is linked to the Islamic Cultural Centre of Belgium which was established in 1963 due to the initiative of Islamic Embassies. But after a visit by the late Saudi King Faisal in 1967, the speed of development was remarkable. With the support of the Belgium monarch Baudouin and the finance of Saudi Arabia a major new Islamic centre was built and opened by the two kings, Baudouin and Khalid Bin Abdul Aziz.

It aims at providing information about Islam, a venue for religious rituals and teaching the Belgium audience about Islamic heritage and civilization. There are monthly and weekly lectures about Islamic issues, publications about Islam, the Peace radio station, translations of Friday sermons and Arabic language classes.

On the social level, the centre supervises the Halal food trade to make sure it conforms to Islamic standards. It also provides help to needy Muslims, issues marriage certificates and offers a family counseling service.

As well as being a partially Muslim city, the Belgium capital is a tourist city with a rich history. It has many historical landmarks palaces, churches and beautiful, elaborately carved statues. The visitor can find many parks for relaxation and enjoyment. The capital organizes numerous festivals; one of the most amazing is the Flower Festival when the main square is covered with a carpet of flowers in amazing designs.

Perhaps the achievement of the Muslim community in Belgium will encourage other European countries to recognize the contribution of Muslim immigrants to the economic, cultural and social development of society. ■