

# Political, Religious and Ethnic Radicalisation among Muslims in Belgium

**MICROCON Policy Working Paper 5**

**Theodoros Koutroubas, Ward Vloeberghs and Zeynep  
Yanasmayan**

**May 2009**

Correct citation: Koutroubas, T., Vloeberghs, W. and Yanasmayan, Z. 2009. *Political, Religious and Ethnic Radicalisation Among Muslims in Belgium*. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 5, Brighton: MICROCON.

First published in 2009

© Theodoros Koutroubas, Ward Vloeberghs and Zeynep Yanasmayan 2009

ISBN-13 978 185864 590 5

For further information, please contact:

MICROCON: A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9RE

Tel: +44 (0)1273 872891

Email: [info@microconflict.eu](mailto:info@microconflict.eu)

Web: [www.microconflict.eu](http://www.microconflict.eu)



# **Political, Religious and Ethnic Radicalisation among Muslims in Belgium**

**Theodoros Koutroubas<sup>1</sup>, Ward Vloeberghs<sup>2</sup> and Zeynep Yanasmayan<sup>3</sup>**

## **MICROCON Policy Working Paper 5**

**Abstract:** Were we to believe alarmist reports on Islam in Belgium, a major terrorist attack against Brussels is only “a matter of time”, and there is a broad perception of the ‘Muslim community’ of Belgium as being increasingly radicalised. In this paper, we discuss a number of different types of radicalisation that have been observed among persons of Islamic faith or culture in Belgium, highlighting the conflicts it has caused or it could become the cause of. Our research suggests that the majority of Muslim Belgians seem to have embraced the spirit of compromise and moderation prevalent in the country’s political scene. Whilst a number of the groups and movements discussed have indeed represented a challenge to the peaceful co-existence between Belgian society’s cultural components, it is important to note the considerable antithesis between the visibility and mediatisation of radical movements and the very poor results they have obtained every time they have tried to transform their alleged popularity into electoral gains.

**Keywords:** Radicalisation; Islam; Belgium; youth; terrorism; integration

---

<sup>1</sup> Invited lecturer at the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL). Email: koutroubas\_globe@hotmail.com.

<sup>2</sup> PhD candidate and teaching assistant, Catholic University of Louvain (UCL). Email: wardvloeberghs@yahoo.com.

<sup>3</sup> PhD candidate, Social Science Faculty, Leuven University. Email: Zeynep.Yanasmayan@law.kuleuven.be.

## Introduction

Were we to believe alarmist reports on Islam in Belgium, such as that of the Dutch journalist Arthur van Amerongen, a major terrorist attack against Brussels is only “a matter of time”.<sup>4</sup> A bit further away from Europe’s capital, other journalists keep announcing the imminent introduction of the sharia in Flemish municipalities,<sup>5</sup> who trembled some years ago at the prospect of Muslim patrols antagonising the police. Responsible for the security of the several international institutions established on its soil and eager to avoid a repetition of the terrorist attacks experienced by other states, the Belgian authorities in fact already take such threats seriously. In December 2007, following the receipt of intelligence reports of an alleged plot to liberate Tunisian-born Al-Qaeda-related convict Nizar Trabelsi, extraordinary measures were adopted in order to protect the capital from an imminent threat.<sup>6</sup> Some months afterwards, in May 2008, the Moroccan authorities announced the dismantlement of a small Islamist group, based in their country but involving a Belgian resident Moroccan as well, allegedly aiming at bombing buildings of the European Commission in Brussels.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the accuracy of such information, both its impact and the frequency with which it occurs prove at least that there is a broad perception of the ‘Muslim community’<sup>8</sup> of Belgium as being increasingly radicalised.

Whether or not this perception is accurate is of course a matter for debate, as several other observers seem to refute such an evolution, pointing rather towards the

---

<sup>4</sup> See for example the interviews of Arthur van Amerongen in *Knack*, “Aanslag in Brussel is kwestie van tijd” (Attack on Brussels is matter of time), 8 August 2007 and in *De Morgen*, “De islam woekert hier als een roos op een mestvaalt” (Islam thrives here like a rose on a dung heap), 27 January 2008. A Dutch journalist, Mr van Amerongen claims to have infiltrated Brussels Moroccan Islamist circles and to have lived among them during a whole year, an experience he chronicles in a book *Brussel: Eurabia*, published by Uitgeverij Atlas (Amsterdam) in February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> See “Ooit wordt de sharia hier ingevoerd” (One day, the sharia will be introduced here), *Knack*, 12 March 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See for example *Le Soir*, 22 December 2007, “La menace terroriste sous le sapin de Noël” (The terrorist threat under the Christmas tree). Fourteen persons were arrested in relation to this alleged plot, only to be released two days afterwards for insufficient proof (*Le Soir*, 24-25 December 2007). See also <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2007/12/22/01003-20071222ARTFIG00126-alerte-antiterroriste-a-bruxelles-.php>

<sup>7</sup> See for example *Le Soir*, 19-20 May 2008 (also in <http://www.lesoir.be/actualite/belgique/demantelement-d-un-reseau-2008-05-19-599389.shtml>)

<sup>8</sup> The term is used here to describe both believers in Islam and persons coming from a Muslim cultural background.

emergence of a distinctively ‘Belgian’ or ‘European’ Islam, well integrated in the Western cultural values (Dassetto, Maréchal and Ferrari, 2007).<sup>9</sup>

What is clear, however, is that the time is past when it was sufficient that issues relating to this community could be successfully managed – or so it seemed – by a handful of charismatic mayors and personalities responsible for areas with a high concentration of Turkish and North African populations.<sup>10</sup> Individuals with leadership and vision can certainly still produce good work, but with only 54 of the at least 333 mosques operating legally in Belgium, it is obvious that more carefully designed, long-term efforts are needed.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, we propose to discuss a number of different types of radicalisation that have been observed among persons of Islamic faith or culture in Belgium, highlighting the conflicts it has caused or it could become the cause of. Of course, the authors are well aware that there are numerous other issues, completely unrelated to the presence of a ‘Muslim’ community, that can cause conflict at a micro level in Belgium.

## **1. Political radicalisation**

### ***1.1 The country’s political context***

Religion has never been absent from Belgium’s political life. Since its declaration of independence from the Netherlands in 1830, the small country has in fact almost always counted a ‘Christian’ party amongst the components of its successive coalition governments, whilst the consensual model that still characterises the country’s governance is based on a perpetually renewed balance between the Catholic (Socio-Christian), the Liberal (originally strongly linked to Free-Masonry and rather anti-clerical) and the Socialist political families. At the same time, the Belgian royal family, whose constitutional powers and influence continue to be quite important, has never made a secret of its strong links with the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, issues such as the financing of faith-based schools or the legalisation of abortion, have

---

<sup>9</sup> See also e.g. *La Libre Belgique*, “L’islam s’intègre bien chez nous” (Islam is well integrated among us), 12 March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Such as for example former mayors such as Guy Cudell of Sint Joost ten Node or the Socialist Party’s heavyweight Philippe Moureaux of Molenbeek St Jean. To a less successful extent, the same applies to the city of Antwerp, with figures such as Bob Cools and, more recently and more efficiently, Antwerp’s mayor, Patrick Janssens. On the impact of Cudell, see Dassetto, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> *De Standaard*, “Vlaanderen erkent moskeeën” (Flanders recognises mosques), 22-23 December 2007, pp. 14-15.

become landmarks in the history of the lengthy and subtle negotiations that Belgian politicians are famous for, with inventive solutions of compromise assuring every time the continuation of internal peace and the stability of the regime. Notwithstanding how difficult and sometimes divisive such issues might have been, it is interesting to point out that, neither these nor the ever-present grievances and rivalries between the Flemish North and the Wallonian South have caused any serious violent conflict in the land. This tradition of non-violent co-existence between people of different convictions, culture, faiths or language is still a major source of pride amongst Belgians.

As is the case in most countries of Western Europe, the last 20 years have witnessed a progress of secularism in the Belgian society. By the mid-2000s, the once rather conservative country was amongst the first countries to legalise marriage between same-sex persons and euthanasia with a broad consensus. With the numbers constantly diminishing of those regularly attending church services, joining the clergy or baptising their children, the two 'Christian' parties have begun to play down their Roman-Catholic identity, putting forward a 'humanistic' profile and vocally dissociating themselves from Vatican guidelines on 'moral' issues.

This period also witnessed the emergence of a growing involvement of Muslims and other persons coming from an Islamic cultural background in Belgian politics, first at the local and then at the regional and the federal levels. Most of these citizens were of Moroccan or Turkish origin whilst Algeria and Tunisia constituted respectively their third and fourth source (Open Society Institute 2007). The access of citizens of foreign origin to elected office was far from being a taboo in the country at the time 'Muslims' started becoming interesting potential candidates for political parties.<sup>12</sup> Despite common beliefs that religious practice and values are higher among citizens hailing (or having parents who hail) from predominantly Muslim countries,<sup>13</sup> it is the traditionally agnostic and morally liberal Socialist Party (both in the South and in the North of the country) that seems to take the biggest share of their vote and counts most of those elected within their ranks. It is interesting to note that during all recent debates and votes on legislation strongly rejected by the official representatives

---

<sup>12</sup> An example amongst many others, Dr. Elio di Rupo, a son of Italian immigrants, who has occupied several ministerial seats including the position of Vice-Prime Minister, and was Minister-President of Wallonia in the 2000s. Dr. di Rupo is currently the President of the French-speaking Socialist Party (PS).

<sup>13</sup> According to the preliminary research report of the Open Society Institute, *op. cit.*, there is a lack of academic knowledge regarding religious practice and beliefs among Muslims in Belgium.

of the most organised religions recognised by the Belgian state,<sup>14</sup> ‘Muslim’ members and officials of political parties have chosen not to differentiate themselves from party lines (at least openly), even when those lines were clearly opposed to the opinions of their community’s religious leaders.

In the pages to come, we are going to discuss the attempts of some of the members of Belgium’s Muslim community to establish Islamic or community-based political parties, their discourse and the tensions they have or could create.

## ***1.2 Islamic political parties***

The first attempt to set up an Islamic political party in Belgium took place in Flanders, with the creation of the Moslim Volkspartij van Brussel en Vlaanderen in 1992. The party never submitted a list to elections at any level and was rather quickly disbanded.

More organised than the leaders of the ‘Moslim Volkspartij’, Mr. Redouane Ahrouch has founded Noor – Le Parti Islamique in 1999. The party, self-defined as an ‘Islamic movement’, was created out of concern for the fact that “the Jewish / Christian values are no longer the foundations of the political orientations that have determined the future for all over the centuries” and with the belief that “religion provides the solution” for the problems society is facing.

Its short ‘manifesto’, figuring in the initial page of what is a very basic (six pages only), non-interactive website (<http://noor.ovh.org>), uses a discourse often proposed by radical religious groups/movements of all denominations. The party’s programme, distributed in mailboxes during electoral campaigns, contains 40 points, presented as simple headlines with no further explanation. A small number of these points express ideas that do seem radical in the current Belgian socio-political context, such as the “re-establishment of capital punishment”,<sup>15</sup> or the promise to “favour marriage in adolescence”. Other points address concerns common to several religious-minded voters such as the “real protection of the family”, the “struggle against alcoholism, smoking, drugs and debauchery” or the need to render divorce more difficult.

---

<sup>14</sup> Islam has this status since 1974.

<sup>15</sup> The author makes it precise: “for odious crimes (murders of innocents)” (<http://noor.ovh.org/Français/program.htm>).

Most of the programme, however, seems to contain promises obviously aimed at pleasing voters in a country with a high level of taxation (abolition of the VAT, the tax on work, etc.).

Absent from the federal elections of June 2007, Noor, which didn't manage to get more than 0.02% of the votes in those of 2003, seems today almost dismantled. Initially designed to contain pages in French, Dutch, Arabic and Turkish, its website was, in May 2008, unavailable in most languages and it was obvious that no updating had been done for a long time. No activity of the party was mentioned in the country's written, electronic or radio-televised press for the last two years, thus rendering its visibility almost non-existent.

Noor's (rather discreet) existence did not prevent the Belgian convert to Islam, Jean-François Abdullah Bastin, to found, together with another group of converts and Muslims coming from Muslim families, the Parti Citoyenneté Prosperité (PCP) in 2003.

The party became quickly visible thanks to its active opposition to the ban of the Islamic scarf or *hijab* in school premises by an institute of secondary education in one of Brussels' municipalities (Laeken), and its vocal defence of the female students who defied that decision. The interdiction of wearing the *hijab* during school hours, adopted by several other schools in Brussels and Wallonia during the years 2003–04 became indeed an issue of tension and controversy in Belgium at that time, and PCP's militancy did bear fruit in the federal elections of 2003. The (new) party, which had presented lists only in the Brussels-Halle-Vilvorde district, scored a mere 0.13% at the national level. It did however manage to obtain almost 3% of the vote in a number of the capital's communities with a high percentage of 'Muslim' population,<sup>16</sup> thanks to a programme including a lot of specifically 'Islamic' proposals, such as the right of Muslim women to wear the Islamic scarf both in class and in their identity card picture, the inclusion of halal menus in school cantinas, the creation of Islamic cemeteries, etc.

Considered to be radical because of its founders' often controversial statements (discussed later in this paper) the party was nevertheless declaring that "it does not contest the legitimacy of the government or any democratically constituted authority

---

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Le Monde diplomatique* of June 2004.



in the country” and explicitly denounced “any terrorist activity, any armed or violent expression of a religious, ideological or political revendication”.

Almost one year after PCP’s foundation, Jean-François Abdullah Bastin has resigned from membership denouncing the party’s “sectarian and arrogant re-orientation” of its ideology by its ‘spiritual guide’, Sheikh Bassam Ayachi. A few months after his departure, “Citoyenneté et Prosperité” took part in the June 2004 elections for the regional government of Brussels-Capital, realising a score of 3.281 votes, or 0.84% of the French-speaking electorate with a list including an important number of ‘new’ Muslims (converts to Islam).

By May 2008 however, this party was also all but extinct according to all indications: it did not present lists for the June 2006 federal elections, it had no presence on the web and in the media and no activity was reported even in those of the capitals’ municipalities that used to constitute its stronghold.

Last in the list of inactive Muslim political parties in Belgium, the ephemeral Moslim Democratische Partij was founded by the then leader of the Arab European League (AEL), Dyab Abou Jahjah, in an effort to translate the League’s alleged popularity among youths of Arabic origin in Flanders into elected representation at the local, regional and federal levels.

An advocate of Arab nationalism,<sup>17</sup> Abou Jahjah had already participated in the federal elections of 2003 as a candidate of the far left coalition RESIST obtaining 0.90% of the vote in the city of Antwerp, headquarters of AEL. Given the rather non-religious political discourse of the League (to be discussed in the following pages) and its (very) secular political allies within RESIST (the ‘Parti du Travail de Belgique’), the choice of ‘Muslim’ as an adjective describing the nature of the new party was rather surprising, and is certainly characteristic of a tendency among ‘Muslim’ candidates (and not only) to often confuse religious affiliation with national origin in order to serve their agendas. Anyhow and despite its founders’ hopes,<sup>18</sup> the Moslim Democratische Partij got worse results than RESIST in Flanders (Antwerp and East Flanders) at the regional elections of 2004 (0.27% in Antwerp and 0.14% in East Flanders) and is now completely disbanded.

---

<sup>17</sup> See his lengthy interview to the ‘Open Democracy’ ([http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe-islam/article\\_1908.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe-islam/article_1908.jsp)).

<sup>18</sup> In his interview to the ‘Open Democracy’, op. cit., Abou Jahjah was predicting that the new party would grow so much that by 2006 it would be able to “have a higher vote and perhaps win one or two representatives in city hall”.

The only Islamic party really active in Belgium by May 2008, when this paper was written, was the Parti Jeunes Musulmans (PJM), founded in 2004 by Jean-François Abdullah Bastin after his resignation from the PCP. PJM considers itself to be “the party of all Muslims and of all the generations that have definitively turned the page of colonialism and humiliations” and according to its statutes “conceives its activities in total harmony with the rules of democracy and the applying legislation in the Kingdom of Belgium”.<sup>19</sup>

Much like Noor and several other radical Christian political movements in Europe, the party deplors “a world that has banished the sacred in a stupid and dangerous way” and calls upon “all men and women of good will who (are) scandalised by the programmed disappearance of every moral sense”.<sup>20</sup> Like its ‘predecessor’, the PCP, PJM also supports the right of Muslims to wear the *hijab* in schools, insist upon *halal* menus in canteens, have holidays during Islamic feasts and be educated in religious schools respectful of the principle of separation between the sexes. At the same time, it pleads for the right of parents to have the ultimate choice on all activities proposed to their children in the framework of their school curriculum (including, for example, museum visits) and promises a free of charge and less ‘West-centred’ compulsory education.<sup>21</sup>

Its allegiance to the rules of democracy and the Belgian laws seem however much less sincere after a careful study of the ideas proposed in its website. When presenting the democratic nature of the party, for example, the authors of the electronic portal of PJM admit that the latter “plays the game (of democracy)...respects scrupulously its rules ...but this does not prevent it from promoting another game, another form of governance, more elaborate, more appropriate to the destiny of Muslims, of Islam, of humanity in general and whose rules are not fixed by men but by God. When the day will come, it will stand up from the table of the game, along with all the Muslims who have played beside it in the most civilized manner, it will thank its hosts and it will re-join its country (its State)”.<sup>22</sup> Some (web)pages further, state that the party its objective “is obviously, in no way to install an Islamic State in Belgium”, only to observe immediately afterwards that it is “perfectly conscious of the fact that the Muslims cannot live but

---

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mvjm.be>

<sup>20</sup> See the Statutes of the party, updated June 2006, on its website, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit., «Enseignement».

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., «Parti Démocrate».

elsewhere, and in due time, when God shall decide, (there will be) an Islam integrally re-established in its original authenticity, in a really Islamic and independent State, perfectly respectful of and respected by the other States of the international community”.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, PJM’s leaders are often using in public a provocative discourse, likely to raise tensions or create conflict both within the community they have pleaded to defend and between the different components of Belgian society. As an example, during the time of the 2007 electoral campaign, the party’s chairman, Mr Bastin, has caused significant controversy by declaring in an interview with TV Brussel that “there is a Muslim party and thus all Muslims must defend their party...”, claiming that “all learned men of Islam and not only the Salafists...have condemned in the most explicit way as being haram all Muslim votes for a non-Islamic party where the possibility of that choice exists”.<sup>24</sup> Bastin often uses an ironic, aggressive and bitter tone, against those ‘Muslims’ who do not support his party and have denounced his politics and discourse as being un-Islamic, challenging the sincerity of his conversion. His attitude is not very different from that of many of PJM representatives who often participate in public debates on issues relating to religion and secularism, and defend their views in an aggressive way. Their reports published afterwards in <http://www.mvjm.be> are all but polite towards those who express different ideas.<sup>25</sup>

Aggressive campaigning didn’t succeed, however, to raise PJM’s popularity. Despite being the only Islamic party competing in the latest federal elections (with candidates in the district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvorde like the PCP four years before) the ‘Young Muslims’ obtained a mere 0.07% of the vote at the national level. Their score was even inferior to that of the PCP in 2003 (0.13%),<sup>26</sup> when Mr Bastin was still the leader of ‘Citizenship and Prosperity’.

---

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., «Etat islamique».

<sup>24</sup> «Lettre ouverte à Monsieur Jean-François Abdullah Bastin, Parti Jeunes Musulmans» and «Réponse de Abdullah Bastin à la lettre ouverte de Salim Haouach», op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, in the page “Le PJM y était” the party’s coverage of the conference on the issue, “La laïcité, rempart contre les intégrismes le racisme, l’antisémitisme, la misogynie et l’homophobie”, organised in Brussels in December 2005 by the Free University of Brussels (ULB) and Secular Jewish Community Centre (CCLJ).

<sup>26</sup> See the comparative results of the 2003 and 2007 federal elections in the Belgian government’s federal web portal ([http://polling2007.belgium.be/fr/cha/results/results\\_graph\\_etop.html](http://polling2007.belgium.be/fr/cha/results/results_graph_etop.html)).

Born to parents of Belgian origin (his father was a University professor), PJM's chairman has become a familiar and rather picturesque figure in Belgian households thanks (at least partially) to his oriental dress, headgear and long beard, that constitute a striking antithesis with the western clothing of almost all politicians with Arabic or Turkish origin in the country. The latter often point out the important presence of converts in PJM's lists (5 out of 14 candidates in 2007), as well as Bastin's own origins, in order to contest his right to represent a Muslim community still quite divided along ethnic lines. The verbal vehemence with which Mr Bastin usually attacks his 'coreligionist' political opponents have made him 'persona non grata' in numerous manifestations on community-related issues and in several mosques.<sup>27</sup> Last but not least, his active support to radical Christian organisations at the time of the discussion of the law opening adoption to same-sex couples in Belgium earned PJM a reputation of extreme right-wing movement. It is interesting to note here that some of these organisations, like Belgique et Chrétienté<sup>28</sup> do not hesitate to use a strong anti-Muslim discourse in their 'defence' of the country's 'Christian roots', in spite of their alliance with the PJM against the "*destruction of the last ramparts of civilisation*".<sup>29</sup>

Often a cause of (micro)tension mostly within the 'Muslim' community, the Parti Jeunes Musulmans did not appear to have the potential for the creation of serious conflict or violence between communities in Belgium at the time these lines were written. As the electoral results demonstrate, its influence was diminishing among voters and its presence in the media seemed to be more due to its leaders' dress code than to the party's real importance. PJM's radical discourse however, and especially the parts relating to a future 'Islamic State' to be founded on an unidentified space, can be used as a weapon by the country's extreme right-wing parties which are constantly growing in popularity in the North.

Not really a political party, but important enough to make the headlines of the international press, **Malika El-Aroud**, a Belgian of Moroccan origin, spouse of the Tunisian Abdessatar Dahmane and one of the assassins of Afghanistan's anti-Taliban leader, Ahmad Chah Massoud, is also worth mentioning here. Viewed as the "*Belgian woman who wages war for Al-Qaeda on the web*",<sup>30</sup> Ms El-Aroun is managing to

---

<sup>27</sup> See, as an example, his own complaints in his answer to Salim Haouach, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.bechrist.be>

<sup>29</sup> See the "Marche pour la Famille" page in the PJM website, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> See for example the *International Herald Tribune*, 27 May 2008 (<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/05/27/europe/terror.php?page=2>).

successfully manipulate Belgium's legal requirements on e-publishing in order to diffuse particularly heinous discourse against the West and to overtly encourage terrorist activities, rallying, notably, Muslim women to support them.<sup>31</sup> Allegedly unwilling to arrest her in order to avoid attracting further publicity around her name,<sup>32</sup> the Belgian authorities are closely monitoring her actions. At the time these lines were written, a serious study on the impact of El-Aroud's message amongst the population of Islamic culture or faith in Belgium was yet to be carried out.

### ***1.3 Non-religious political radicalisation***

#### *The Arab-European League (AEL)*

Founded in 2000 by Dyab Abou Jahjah, the Arab-European League defines itself as “a political and social movement that stands for the Rights of the Arab and Muslim communities in Europe and the Arab causes in general.”<sup>33</sup> The movement, which proclaims that it also stands for “solidarity with all Muslim peoples and communities and all the oppressed peoples of the world”, declares that its members' objective is to abide and strive for 19 principles and goals, 6 of which concern the Arab Diaspora and 13 the Arab world in general.

The goals of the League regarding Arabs in Europe are not radically different from those of many an immigrant-friendly political party or NGO in modern-day Belgium. AEL pleads in fact for the right of Arab immigrants to cultivate their cultural identity “while engaging actively as European citizens in the countries of residence, with equal rights and treatment”, and vows to combat racism, Islamophobia, discrimination in the fields of employment, housing and education, as well as attempts to breach their freedom of expression, religion, religious practice or any other of their human rights.

It is however the “Arab Nation”, and not so much its Diaspora in Europe, that seems to be the target of the movement's manifesto. AEL's 13 declarations “towards the Arab world” are in fact nothing less than a project for the creation of an Empire, redrafting the current map “in order to give birth to the “Unity of the Arab people in one democratic federal State.” (points 7 & 8). The League's vision includes a whole constitution for its ideal future ‘Arab homeland’, the borders of which would extend

---

<sup>31</sup> See for example <http://minbar-sos.com/>

<sup>32</sup> See *Le Monde*, 17 June 2008.

<sup>33</sup> See its website (<http://www.arabeuropean.org>).

from the Atlantic to Iran. Political freedom, freedom of expression, social rights, eradication of poverty, measures against the concentration of power including the field of the media, rights for linguistic minorities, internal autonomy for the ‘provinces’ of Rif, Sous and Kabilya, no detail has been left out from the movement’s ambitious plan!

The son of a Muslim father and a Christian mother, Abou Jahjah calls for a secular State that “will also respect religious diversity... provide all individuals and groups the freedom to practice their religion (and) grant its citizens the protection in order to be able of changing religion, or practicing no religion at all without being persecuted or discriminated.” (point 11). Despite that, and probably for historical reasons or in order not to completely alienate religious-minded from potential AEL membership, the movement affirms that “the Arab Constitution will refer to Islam as the Religion of the Arab State”. It is obvious however that we are here far away from the PJM’s imaginative future Islamic realm. For the League in fact, democracy is “the only acceptable system of government” and has links to the Arab tradition. In that context, AEL makes clear its disapproval of the current Arab regimes – albeit falling short from openly denouncing them (point 6).

These ambitious declarations of intentions would have certainly not justified the classification of the Arab-European League among the examples, of political radicalisation within Belgium’s ‘Muslim community’,<sup>34</sup> if it weren’t for the discourse and activities with which it has chosen to promote its goals, and, of course, for its attitude regarding the State of Israel. Already in the fourth point of its declarations of intentions, the movement defines itself as “an anti-colonial and anti-Zionist organisation”. Point 6 becomes even more explicit: “We reject the Zionist project in Palestine and we call for the dismantling of the Zionist entity and the establishing of a united Palestinian democratic state in all historical Palestine.” The terminology of the League is very close to that often used by the Hamas, or the Hizbullah, even if Abou Jahjah’s movement does not (at least officially) wish to see the entire Jewish population extinct from an ‘historical Palestine’ but rather calls for an Arab state where “Arabs and Jews can coexist peacefully enjoying equal rights without any discrimination.”.

---

<sup>34</sup> The term ‘Muslim community’ of Belgium signifies here not only the believers in Islam but all those who have origins in countries where Islam is the dominant religion and/or cultural tradition.

With an important part of its activities in Belgium concentrated in the city of Antwerp, which also serves as a traditional centre of the country's orthodox Jewish community, the absence of tensions between the latter and the Arab-European League would have been indeed a surprise. In April 2002, the AEL made its debut in the Belgian media by organising a pro-Palestinian demonstration close to Antwerp's Jewish neighbourhood. Condemned by the city's union of mosques, the event degenerated into violence and soon Dyab Abou Jahjah became a household figure in a context marked by the growing popularity of the openly anti-immigrant, far-right-wing party Vlaams Blok in Flanders.<sup>35</sup> It was one of this party's MPs, Filip Dewinter, who triggered the event that gave the movement a visibility without precedent in Belgian annals. A confidential note of the police, announcing an intensification of controls towards youths of Moroccan origin, was in fact transmitted to the Flemish press by the extremist parliamentarian, who was obviously aiming at raising inter-community tension in order to serve his party's scaremongering goals. AEL reacted almost immediately by announcing the creation of Arab squads composed of young men who would patrol the city with cameras in order to monitor police excesses against Antwerp's (mainly North African) Arab community. The appearance of the first AEL patrols (dressed in black) on the streets of the Flemish metropolis caused a wave of outrage among all Belgian political parties, greatly increasing the perceived importance of what was in reality a group with no more than 800 members (according to its own estimations).<sup>36</sup> A dreadful coincidence, the assassination of a Moroccan-born young schoolteacher by a 66-year-old pensioner (described as being mentally unstable by the prosecutors) just days after the setting up of the patrols, pushed Antwerp into at least two days of violent riots in which the League played a prominent role. Accusing the AEL of attempting to create areas of no-go for the police, the authorities arrested Abou Jahjah, charging him with conspiracy to cause disorder, whilst Prime-Minister Guy Verhofstadt was announcing an investigation on his movement and the Parliament was debating how to handle the affair.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> See *Le Soir*, 23-24 November 2002.

<sup>36</sup> BBC News was referring to Abou Jahjah at the time as "Belgium's Arab Leader" (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2529683.stm>).

<sup>37</sup> To get an idea of how these events were covered by the Belgian and international media, see for example *Le Soir* of 23-24 November 2002, op. cit., *La Libre Belgique* ([http://www.lalibre.be/index.php?view=article&art\\_id=90032](http://www.lalibre.be/index.php?view=article&art_id=90032)) and [http://www.lalibre.be/index.php?view=article&art\\_id=92644](http://www.lalibre.be/index.php?view=article&art_id=92644)), *De Standaard* ([http://www.standaard.be/Artikel/Detail.aspx?artikelId=DST21112002\\_008&word=Dyab+Abou+Jahjah](http://www.standaard.be/Artikel/Detail.aspx?artikelId=DST21112002_008&word=Dyab+Abou+Jahjah)),

Eventually, the unrest in Flanders's biggest city calmed down, no incriminating evidence was found regarding AEL's finances nor any links to terrorist groups (a suspicion initiated, again, by the Vlaams Blok, nowadays re-named Vlaams Belang) and Dyab Abou Jahjah was released<sup>38</sup> with a brand new reputation as 'Belgium's Malcolm X'<sup>39</sup> and a storm of invitations for interviews by media from all over Europe. In the years that followed, the League and its President have fully exploited their prestige as champions of the immigrant youth's cause, establishing a strong branch in the Netherlands and profiting from different controversial debates in order to make their voice heard.

As mentioned in the previous pages, the AEL did try to translate its visibility into votes by forming a cartel with the Marxist-Leninist Parti du travail de Belgique - Partij van de Arbeid van België (PTB - PVDA) and was not discouraged by its poor electoral results in the federal elections of 2003.<sup>40</sup> Acting in a way that could be viewed as political opportunism given the organisation's and his own secular credo, Abou Jahjah founded soon afterwards the Moslim Democratische Partij (MDP). A month before MDP's first (and last) electoral test, in an interview with "Open Democracy", he was defining himself as a "moderate Muslim", albeit insisting on his Arab-nationalist ideology:

It is easier to mobilise if you talk only about Islam. But we chose a more difficult and complex route. Having taken up that challenge, we are succeeding despite the obstacles. This is because when you talk to people for a while they realise that their identity is more complex than just their religion. They know it in themselves.<sup>41</sup>

Voters did not seem to share his views, however, and the MDP had a very short existence. After this second electoral defeat, the movement began to concentrate on the political developments in the Middle East, organising demonstrations against the war in Iraq or Israeli occupation of "historical Palestine" and using an increasingly

---

or BBC News (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2526895.stm>,  
and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2522987.stm>)

<sup>38</sup> His trial for these events before the appeals court of Antwerp was still going on at the time these lines were written.

<sup>39</sup> See BBC News:

([http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing\\_continents/2847621.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/2847621.stm)).

<sup>40</sup> See Dyab Abou Jahjah's interview with Rosemary Bechler of "Open Democracy", op. cit. (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



radicalised discourse. During the controversy caused by the caricatures of Muhammad published by a Danish newspaper, the League encouraged the drawing of anti-Semitic, anti-gay or anti-European cartoons in retaliation, and its current website still hosts a couple of particularly heinous ones under the cynical title: “Freedom of speech Campaign”.<sup>42</sup> The League had already become so vehemently anti-Israel by then that it didn’t hesitate to publish its support for some of the most extremist enemies of the Jewish State.<sup>43</sup>

At the time of the Hizbullah–Israeli conflict of 2006, Dyab Abou Jahjah resigned from the AEL leadership and left for Lebanon in order to join the fighting. He delivered a particularly theatrical adieu to his “comrades”:

This might be the last thing I’ll write before going home on a trip that might be my last...I lived my life for this Nation and not a hair in me will hesitate in laying it down for this Nation too. When oppression rises above the sun to cover it, and injustice defies the wind and the Wicked and the Evil feast on the Flesh of innocent men, women and children, from within the darkness and the orgy of blood, a sword will shine, and the brave will murmur: “What a beautiful day to die.”<sup>44</sup>

At the end, Mr Abou Jahjah didn’t die a martyr, nor did he realise his dreams to see the AEL expanding in France, gaining seats in Antwerp and Utrecht city councils and becoming a European trans-national party.<sup>45</sup> He did continue to write though, with the same militant attitude. His personal diary, *Dagboek Beiroet Brussel*, parts of which were published in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*<sup>46</sup> betrays however a certain fatigue towards his fellow Arab-Belgian ‘compatriots’, considered by him to be “very conservative in matters of religion ...(and) strictly following an approach that excludes any rationality ( een kritiekloze benadering) when it comes to faith in its most orthodox form”. Still active within the movement, AEL’s former President nowadays has his own blog,<sup>47</sup> from where he keeps attacking ‘Zionism’, and those of

---

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.arabeuropean.org/newsdetail.php?ID=95>

<sup>43</sup> See for example: “Zionism is racism: Ahmadinajad said it but we mean it” (<http://www.arabeuropean.org/article.php?ID=49>).

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.arabeuropean.org/article.php?ID=117>

<sup>45</sup> See interview with “Open Democracy”, op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> [http://www.trouw.nl/deverdieping/overigeartikelen/article690699.ece/Dyab\\_Abou\\_Jahjah\\_Maro](http://www.trouw.nl/deverdieping/overigeartikelen/article690699.ece/Dyab_Abou_Jahjah_Maro)

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.aboujahjah.com>

his fellow Belgians of Arab origins who were luckier than him with the voters, or less critical of their country of adoption.<sup>48</sup>

The Arab-European League was still active by May 2008, mostly in Flanders. Its discourse hasn't changed much from its days of glory (the latest item posted on the website was a call for demonstration "against the crimes of the Zionist entity") but its presence in the media was severely reduced and it has never tried to put forward candidates in elections since 2004.

The movement still represents a potential source of severe tension and violent conflict in Brussels and the North of the country, albeit less than it used to, but it seems to have lost a great deal of its credibility among the immigrant youth and to have become rather marginalised within the Belgian Muslim community.

## **2. Religious, non-political radicalisation**

Non-political religious radicalisation can be observed among Belgian Muslims both at an individual and at a collective level. By May 2008, a number of organised radical religious groups without known or openly expressed political ambitions were active in the country. We discuss below the more important and visible among them.

It is, at this point, necessary to keep in mind that the existence of organised groups animated by and practising a 'radical' form of religion – one that totally or partially rejects the ways of society and proposes a conservative interpretation of sacred texts as absolute rules for everyday life – is a phenomenon as old as organised religion itself. Some of these groups have a 'mystic', monastic approach to their self-appointed mission (constantly praying for the salvation of humanity for example), and some other a militant one (proselytising the 'infidels' and calling upon the 'sinners' to repent, in ways that vary, from preaching to coercion). Extreme militancy in a number of these groups leads to violent or even terrorist activities.

It goes of course without saying that immigrants and their sons and daughters are far from being the only category of persons that could be tempted to join these groups. It is interesting to note in this context that converts, born to non-Muslim 'autochthon' parents, constitute a privileged target for some of the most militant among the radical Islamic religious groups in Belgium. It is a sad fact that the only Belgian Muslim who ever committed a suicide attack, Muriel Degauque (in Iraq in 2005), was a convert to Islam of Belgian origin.

---

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.aboujahjah.com/?p=110#more-110>

By May 2008, a highly diversified but not always inter-related network of Islamic associations was operating in Belgium. The country's capital was home to approximately 39% of all Belgian 'Muslims', 70% of whom were of Moroccan origin (Torrekens 2007). The community was geographically very concentrated (75% of its members were residing in 5 of the 19 municipalities of the Brussels region) and well organised. One could observe that Muslims of Turkish origin have the tendency to more easily set up organisations than their co-religionists of Arab or Berber background.

### *Milli Görüş*

Today a major, if not *the* major movement among religious-minded persons of Turkish origin in Western Europe, Milli constitutes a significant actor in Belgium's Islamic scene. Even though the literal translation of its name, National Vision,<sup>49</sup> bears no mention of Islam, the word Milli does in fact not refer to the Turkish nation but to the Qur'anic notion of 'Millet'.<sup>50</sup>

In Belgium, the organisation has never demonstrated political ambitions. Its actions evolve around strengthening and inspiring Islamic practices among families and youth. It also runs a number of educational institutions and boarding schools. Unlike official Turkish Islam, the Milli Görüş preaches what it considers to be a 'filter-less religion',<sup>51</sup> understood as a close following of the literal meaning of the sacred texts of Islam. It could be said in fact that it takes a rather holistic approach to religion and claims that Islam provides all necessary guiding principles for a Muslim's (everyday) life. These ideas have given the organisation a political dimension in Turkey, where it has traditionally supported political parties sharing its vision.

Despite its Turkish frame of reference, Milli Görüş does place religious identity higher than national affiliation and works for the dissemination of a traditionalist Islamic ideology in a European context. Its discourse and activities seem to progressively take into consideration the need of the community's full integration in Belgian society and it has recently began to propose Koranic courses in French and Dutch.

---

<sup>49</sup> The name of the organisation refers to the title of a pamphlet published in 1973 by Turkish politician Necmettin Erbakan.

<sup>50</sup> For further information, see <http://www.igmg.de/verband/islamic-community-milli-goerues/what-does-milli-goerues-mean.html>.

<sup>51</sup> Interview by the authors with a representative of Milli Görüş in Belgium.

Currently, the organisation has a significant number of adherents in the provinces of Limburg (Flanders), Hainaut (Wallonia) and in the Brussels-Capital region. They all operate under the name *Belçika-Islam Federasyonu*, the Islamic Federation of Belgium, established in 1986. It estimates that its members constitute up to 30% of all persons of Turkish origin living in Belgium, and attributes its influence to its operating of some 30 mosques.

### *Süleymancilar*

Founded in Turkey during the 1940s by Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan, Süleymancilar began its activities in Western Europe in 1973. Its followers, the Süleymancis, attribute saintly powers to the founder and call themselves the ‘disciples of Süleyman’, being often accused of being heretics despite the fact that they claim not to constitute a sect.

The movement is thought to be the first of its kind established among the Turkish immigrants living in Europe. An Islamic judge under the Ottoman Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan was disenchanted by the attitude of the secular Turkish Republic towards Islam. His (and the movement’s) activities have thus taken the form of opposition to the new regime, responsible for the abolition of the Islamic Caliphate, which Süleymancilar still strives to restore albeit by non-violent means. In Turkey, its Koranic schools oppose the official Imam-Hatip schools that are under the control of the secular authorities, and they are often identified with (right-wing) radical extremism (Nielsen 2004). Notwithstanding that, the organisation has no (known) political activities or ambitions in Belgium.

Today, its members concentrate on changing secular practices among the society through the setting up of new mosques and education facilities, as well as through publications and lectures, notably in Antwerp, in Brussels and in the province of Limburg. The movement is in fact running approximately 13 Islamic cultural centres throughout Belgium, called *Belçika Islam Kültür Merkezleri Birliği*. Unlike *Milli Görüş*, it is very discreet when it comes to publicity and it does not seek many contacts with other organisations or the political authorities. Hence, it is not considered to be a major actor in the national debates concerning Islam or the integration of Turkish immigrants in Belgian society.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> See Meryem Kanmaz, “Des organisations turques aux fédérations flamandes: 40 ans de vie associative en Flandre”, *Nouvelle Tribune*, No. 34, December 2003.

## *Tablighi*

Jama'at al-Tabligh was founded by Mohamed Ilyas (1885-1944) in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Northern India. The centre of the movement is located in Nizam ud-Din, in the vicinity of Delhi.

This religious movement has at times been labelled as “Islam’s Jehovah’s Witnesses”, mainly because of its organisational structure and activities, which evolve around mobile Koranic schools (*madrassa’s*), door-to door proselytising and continuously renewed preaching teams, formed by volunteers trained to reach even those parts of the population generally ignored by similar other groups.

Peaceful behaviour constitutes a key notion for the Tablighi, since according to their founder a religious act can never result from coercion. As a consequence, the movement claims not to be interested in any quest for (political) power and its members observe strict neutrality towards political parties, viewing them as a cause of division among Muslims. Tablighis practice a radical form of Islam, studying the scripture and transmitting<sup>53</sup> the faith. They believe in a struggle to imitate the way of life of the prophet, with poverty, simple ways and a meticulous regulation of corporeal facts and gestures. The nucleus of the organisation is in fact formed by a relatively small number of such missionaries.

In Belgium Tablighi is active within different mosques and non-profit-making associations, the first and most central of which was established in 1975. Since the 1980s it has become more visible in all parts of Belgium and has obtained a legally recognised status (Dassetto 1988). Because of their strong organisation, the movement has quickly managed to become the first effective and successful alternative for an ‘Islam of the people’ in the country and by 1985 it was able to set up a Federation of Mosques and Cultural Islamic Organisations (Fédération des Mosquées et des Associations Culturelles et Islamiques de Belgique). This federation gradually evolved, cunningly using the attention of the media, into a very influential element within Belgian Islam. Since the 1990s, however, the movement appears to have lost some of its influence, notably amongst the younger generation (Maréchal 2008). Most of its members today seem to be of Moroccan origin, although the organisation can still count on the loyalty of many well connected Pakistanis as well.

---

<sup>53</sup> *Tablîgh* (Arabic) can be translated as “transmission” or as “conveyance” and hence as conveyance or transmission of a message.

### *Muslim Brotherhood*

The Jama'iyyat al-ikhwân al-muslimîn, very well known for its actions in the Middle East, is particularly active among Muslims of Arab origin in Belgium. Composed of a myriad of fractions, the 'brothers' are also divided between an Egyptian and a Syrian 'obedience'. The organisation seems to raise members and sympathisers by proposing an authentic religious discourse that does not resent the reform of some of the most antiquated traditions and encourages the merging of the faithful within their host societies. Its activities in Belgium mainly evolve around preaching and education with an emphasis on the renewal of moral norms.

### *Hizbullah*

The 'party of God' is also present in Belgium, albeit not significantly so. Its members seem to be working to raise funds to finance its Lebanese activities. It is mentioned here mainly because of its purely religious activities, which include preaching and dissemination of sermons. Even these endeavours however are most often framed within a discourse denouncing the Israeli occupation of Palestine,<sup>54</sup> whilst issues proper to the Muslim community of Belgium do not seem to belong to its top priorities. It is interesting to mention that Hizbullah is one of the few Shiite organisations in the overwhelmingly Sunni landscape of Islamic movements in Europe.

### *Other Groups*

Belgian citizens or residents belonging to Sufi orders have organised themselves according to different traditions of Islamic mysticism. The most significant ones include the Naqshbandiyya (with different branches), the Barelwi (originating from the Indian peninsula), the Deobandi (reformist soufis focusing on traditional learning) and the Nurcu (attaching particular attention to personal devotion and the compatibility of Islamic revelation with discoveries in natural science). Very few Belgian Muslims (of Turkish origin concentrated mainly in Liège) are believed to be members of Kaplancilar (Manço 1997), an Islamic movement outlawed in Germany.

---

<sup>54</sup> The most recent (small) demonstration with a 'free Palestine' theme organised by the movement took place in the centre of Brussels on Sunday, 4 May 2008.

### 3. National/Ethnic Tensions

Our analysis of the landscape of the Belgian Muslim community could not be complete without the discussion of groups whose activities are related to the politics of the countries of origin of its members. Such groups are particularly present in the associative life of Turkish immigrants: It is believed in fact that the combination of interlinked dynamics such as economic exclusion due to rural origins, cultural and linguistic marginalisation and residential concentration made it possible for Turkish immigrants to keep very close links with their home country (ibid).

Indeed, for many among the Turkish community in Brussels, nationalism provides an overarching framework for self-definition. To quote a Belgian politician of Turkish descent, “regardless of their stance in the political spectrum, everyone is a bit of a nationalist here”.<sup>55</sup> The results of a survey (Kaya and Kentel 2007) very recently conducted indicate in fact that 42% of Belgian-Turks feel equally close to their country of residence and to that of origin. According to the same research, their close attachment to the home country does not seem to decrease according to the length of the period they have been residing abroad or according to their political affiliation. Thus, even groups such as the Milli Görüş, which aim to address Belgian Muslims rather than Belgian Turks, would have had a hard time recruiting members if they’d dare to completely estrange themselves from the notion of Turkishness.

Milli Görüş’ participation in the organisation of a demonstration entitled “Condemning the terror – Invitation to solidarity” can be seen as an acknowledgement of this fact. The event in question took place in Brussels on 3 November 2007, and its analysis is very helpful in understanding the current feelings within the Turkish community in Belgium.

At the end of October 2007, the killing of 12 soldiers by PKK in an ambush in the Southeast of Turkey led to violent reactions throughout Europe. In Brussels, Turkish youngsters, mostly teenagers, demonstrated their anger in the streets of Schaarbeek – mainly along the Chaussée de Haecht which is heavily populated by Turkish immigrants. The protest degenerated into acts of vandalism (breaking the glass windows of cafés, throwing stones at the police, beating up journalists, etc.), widely attributed by the Belgian media to ultra-nationalist groups. Even though such

---

<sup>55</sup> Interview with the authors, our translation.

groups were also to be blamed for the aggression, the media coverage of the events underestimated the complex nature of the youngsters' behaviour.

Of course, the deep-rooted rivalries between the Turkish and the Kurdish populations have played a significant role in the genesis of the violence and so have done the extreme-right wing organisations. It is not by coincidence that the Turkish youngsters attacked cafés and shops known to be owned by Kurds. These intolerable acts were indeed committed by a band of Turkish ultra-nationalists and a number of ill-advised teenagers who received SMS and e-mails about the venue and time of the demonstration from sources they have refused to name. The Turkish associations of Brussels said to be unaware of the senders of these messages and claimed that they believed the manifestation to be spontaneous. Both the silence of the youngsters and their elders, and the fact that many inhabitants of the area have shown their sympathy to those arrested by driving around in cars bearing Grey Wolves stickers<sup>56</sup> is an indicator of the vulnerability of the Turkish population in Schaarbeek to radical nationalist discourse.

But the youngsters who demonstrated against the PKK have been also particularly aggressive towards the Belgian police. Far from being impulsive behaviour, this reflects a wider frustration caused by their perception of the way the Belgian authorities dealt with the issue. Many Belgian Turks felt in fact that they had been unfairly treated and that their grief had not been respected, an impression shared and spread by the major community organisations. Moreover, several Turkish-speaking media have accused Belgium of being tolerant towards the activities of organisations considered to be terrorist in Turkey (Kaya and Kentel 2007:40).<sup>57</sup> The escape of Fehriye Erdal, from the hands of the Belgian justice whilst she was wanted for murder in Turkey, has contributed to this feeling.

One of the reasons many within the Turkish community are eager to condone nationalistic discourse is their economic and educational situation, which seems to be worse than that of other immigrant groups (Manço and Manço 2000; Manço 2001; Bousetta and Bernes 2007; Kaya and Kentel 2007). Coupled with the Belgian Turks'

---

<sup>56</sup> See below for more on the Grey Wolves.

<sup>57</sup> See for example, <http://yenisafak.com.tr/arsiv/2002/mayis/05/g7.html>, <http://www.belturk.be/go.php?go=3031562&do=details&return=summary>, <http://www.euractiv.com.tr/ab-ve-turkiye/article/belcikada-okullarda-pkk-propagandasi>, <http://www.belturk.be/go.php?go=3030952&do=details&return=summary&pg=125>.



tendency to concentrate their residencies,<sup>58</sup> this situation provides the perfect ground for nationalist discourses to flourish. Hence, a triggering event such as the killing of soldiers in the Southeast of Turkey, combined with a provocation orchestrated by the ultra-nationalist groups, is sufficient to provoke serious tensions. Failing to understand the complexity of these sociological dynamics could largely undermine the effectiveness of policies aiming at addressing the issues creating them and their (more visible) effects.

Tensions between a big part of the Belgian Turkish community and the Turkish authorities in Belgium should be also taken into consideration in the analysis of the November 2007 events. Many have in fact criticised the Turkish embassy for downplaying their national sensitivities. At the same time, the embassy's failure to address in a sensitive manner the community's feelings has facilitated the stirring up of these feelings by the ultra-nationalists, leading eventually to the violent demonstrations.<sup>59</sup> Criticism has also been addressed to Belgian politicians of Turkish descent. Instead of intervening in order to calm feelings, a number of them have allegedly tried to increase their popularity by using a 'double discourse', including statements such as "We are all soldiers".<sup>60</sup>

We have tried to demonstrate that radical nationalistic groups are not solely responsible for the violence and conflict within Belgium's Turkish community. In the sections that follow we discuss a number of movements that exalt ethnic identity among Belgians of immigrant origin and that might become a source of serious tensions in the years to come.

### *Grey Wolves*

Although its formal name in Turkish is *Ülkücüler*, the youth organisation of the Turkish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) is better known as the 'Grey Wolves', a reference to a Turkic legend in which a female wolf is believed to have fed a wounded boy and to have helped him reproduce a new generation of Turks.

The *Ülkücü* ideology puts accent on Turkish history insisting on its glorious days and exploiting events such as the establishment of the first Turkish States in

---

<sup>58</sup> To understand how the policies of the municipality in which the Turkish community lives can contribute to their marginalisation, see Manço and Kanmaz, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> This might actually reveal a wider trend, for the survey study of Kaya and Kentel (1997:40), shows that only 7% of the Belgian-Turks reported that they appreciate the efforts of official Turkish bodies in Belgium.

<sup>60</sup> Evening News bulletin of the Belgian channel *La Une* on 26 October 2007.

Central Asia, almost tracing a ‘Turkish race’.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, its conception of the Turkish nation is blended with Islam. The principle of what they consider to be the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam is very dominant in their rhetoric and activities. Mottos like “Your doctor will be a Turk and your medicine will be Islam” reflect their feelings on the issue. The Wolves are also characterised by a strong emphasis on leadership and hierarchical, military-like organisation.

In Belgium, the largest among the organisations considered to be affiliated with or sympathetic to the Wolves is the Belçika Türk Federasyonu (BTF). BTF came under considerable criticism during the 2006 regional and local elections when mainstream parties such as the Parti Socialiste (PS) and the Centre Démocrate Humaniste (CDH) chose to include BTF members or sympathisers on their lists of candidates and were thus accused by Belgian media at belonging to a fascist ultra-nationalistic movement.<sup>62</sup> In fact, some of these candidates have regularly attended organised events of a nationalistic character, such as the ceremony to commemorate the death of the “Great Turkish Idealist leader”<sup>63</sup> Alparslan Türkeş, founder of the Nationalist Movement Party in Turkey.

The official aim of the Grey Wolves in Belgium is to foster loyalty among young people of Turkish origin to their ancestral culture, religion and history and to keep alive the Turkish identity in Europe (Arslan 2004). BTF claims to oppose not the integration of Belgian-Turks into their host society but rather their assimilation by it. Most of its activities seem to be centred on issues relevant to Turkish national sensitivities. It has a strong stance towards the Armenian genocide controversy and the Kurdish question and its demonstrations, such as, for example the one against the erection of an Armenian monument in Brussels, have often led to violence and/or tensions between members of different communities.

### *Kurdish Institute of Brussels*

The association was established in 1978 in order to raise awareness of the Kurdish cause and to help the integration process of Kurdish immigrants. Its activities have always been in line with this double objective. The institute organises many cultural

---

<sup>61</sup> See the official website of the Ülkücü (<http://www.ulkuocaklari.org.tr/>).

<sup>62</sup> To read a few press articles, see <http://archive.indymedia.be/news/2003/07/70265.html>, [http://www.lesoir.be/regions/bruxelles/2006/08/25/article\\_van\\_gorp\\_chez\\_l\\_extreme\\_droite\\_turque.shtml](http://www.lesoir.be/regions/bruxelles/2006/08/25/article_van_gorp_chez_l_extreme_droite_turque.shtml)

<sup>63</sup> Our translation from the speech of the President of the BTF.

events such as concerts and folkloric dance shows in order to better acquaint Belgian society with Kurdish civilisation. Largely dominated by Turkish Kurds, it also assists the immigrants by offering French, Dutch and Kurdish language courses. In parallel to these activities, the Kurdish Institute has a very explicit political agenda, served by other actions, such as press conferences or demonstrations, designed to draw attention to violations of human rights in Turkey and the precarious situation of the Kurdish people in the Southeast of the Republic. These actions are sometimes organised jointly with other associations of immigrant groups with issues against past and present Turkish policies, such as its stance vis-à-vis the Armenians.

Belgium also hosts other Kurdish organisations active in promoting the Kurdish national cause, such as the Kurdish Cultural Centre or the Confederation of Kurdish Associations in Europe. At the time of publication, the latter was pursuing a campaign to prevent Europeans from going to Turkey for holidays arguing that their money would be financing the war against Kurds. The campaign in question is an example of how issues relating to the homeland politics can cause tension in the host country.

All these organisations are looked upon with suspicion by Belgium's Turkish associations. The latter believe them to be supporters or sympathisers of the PKK, and demand that they denounce it as a terrorist organisation before entering into dialogue with them.<sup>64</sup> The Kurdish organisations refrain from condemning PKK's acts but they often underline that their problem is not with the Turkish people as such but with the politics of Turkey.<sup>65</sup> Thus, for the time being a constructive dialogue between the two communities seems rather unlikely. This lack of communication is further accelerated by physical separation. While Belgian Turks predominantly live and socialise in Schaarbeek, Kurds reside in the neighbourhood of Saint Josse.

## **Conclusions**

Our research and interviews suggest that the majority of Muslim Belgians seem to have embraced the spirit of compromise and moderation prevalent in the country's political scene. Despite the presence of several radical movements within its borders, Belgium in fact was largely spared the very serious violence and conflict that were

---

<sup>64</sup> As remarked in interviews with representatives of local Turkish associations and the comments by the secretary-general of the EYAD in a broadcasted debate on Télé-Bruxelles on 4 November 2007, following the violent events.

<sup>65</sup> As stated by the representative of the Kurdish Cultural Centre in a Broadcasted debate on Télé-Bruxelles on 4 November 2007, following the violent events.

recently experienced by some of the neighbouring countries with large populations of Islamic cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, a number of the groups and movements discussed have indeed represented a challenge to the peaceful co-existence between Belgian society's cultural components and the attempt to create a distinctively Belgian Islam is far from bearing fruit.

One of the most important conclusions to draw from this brief study is the considerable antithesis between the visibility and mediatisation of radical movements and the very poor results they have obtained every time they have tried to transform their alleged popularity into electoral gains. It seems to us in fact that the attention often given by the media to such movements is attributable more to a quest for the dramatic and sensational than to a genuine wish to raise awareness about the different tendencies within Belgium's relatively large Muslim community.

Even the most radical organisations in the country's Muslim community have never really been the cause of an incident more serious than the usual tensions one witnesses at the end of football competitions between long-standing rivals. At the same time, however, an important number of initiatives and activities launched and carried out by other groups originating from the same community but striving for much less provocative or spectacular effects are barely mentioned, with the excuse that they concern only a minority of Belgian Muslims. It is our belief however, that electoral results are a very reliable test of real popularity and one that none of the radical groups that often occupy the national and regional television channels or newspaper front pages has managed to pass.

Many Belgian citizens of Islamic cultural background in fact deeply disapprove of radicalisation tendencies within their community and wholeheartedly condemn all criminal acts. These citizens appreciate what they experience as being the benefits of living in Belgium (freedom of religion, freedom of speech,...). And unfortunately, these citizens are the first victims of the stigmatisation of "the Muslims in Belgium" or the "Moroccans/Turks in Belgium", as a consequence of unfounded generalisations, or manipulation of public opinion by extreme right-wing political parties, such as the Vlaams Belang.

As is well known, religion can be both a personal 'mystical' experience and a collective one. In Belgium, as in several other countries, many youngsters born to immigrant parents (and not only) feel alienated by both the cultural values of their

families and those of the society surrounding them. In search of stronger beliefs that could provide them with a feeling of belonging, these youngsters are often tempted by radical groups, where such a feeling is particularly stressed. Inside such groups their energy is channelled into activities designed to make them feel accepted, important and even self-righteous, when many among their 'autochthon' compatriots are quick to collectively hold them responsible for anti-social behaviour or an alleged rise of criminality.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, membership/participation in such movements offers them the opportunity to express their discontentment, in a way that is 'dignified' by the prestige of a great religious/cultural tradition, with what they perceive as being unfair treatment by Belgian authorities and society as well as with their own parents' attitude towards them (and towards life in general). This is not an unavoidable or irreversible process, however, and it is important to keep in mind, as we have already discussed elsewhere (Koutroubas and Vloeberghs 2008), that, far from being static, identity is a dynamic process, a conception that is lived and experienced day by day in an ever-changing/evolving society and throughout life. As such, identity has by definition a changing nature. It is something that can be easily claimed but cannot be authoritatively attributed.

In a multicultural society such as ours the risk of micro conflicts is always present and in fact unavoidable. The realities we have analysed can easily lead us to predict that issues such as evolution of the political situation in Iraq and the related reaction of Turkey is likely to create tensions between the Turkish and Kurdish communities living in Belgium. Likewise, the liberation of Palestine will continue to be a major issue of mobilisation and tension for Belgian residents with Arab sensibilities and groups such as the ones we have observed will certainly try to capitalise on the unrest. And of course, xenophobic and fear-mongering parties in both the North and the South of the country are likely to use tensions (or an eventual terrorist attack) as grounds for promoting their own agendas.

On the whole, however, Belgium's Muslims are likely to remain no more radicalised than their Christian or their Jewish compatriots. At a time when religious radicalisation has become almost synonymous with Islamic radicalisation, it is important to remember that the need for political parties that express religious concerns or are inspired by a faith-based world view is present in all communities and is not likely to disappear as long as there are persons who place faith high among their

---

<sup>66</sup> On this topic, see Husain 2007

priorities. As for political radicalisation, the phenomenon does occur in Belgium in many contexts, and unfortunately no faith, language, culture or any other element-based community is immune.<sup>67</sup>

Can we say that everything is ok then? No, it is not. Youngsters of immigrant origin, who feel excluded from both their parents' culture and their autochthon compatriots' world, constitute a huge potential source of tension and an easy prey for radical groups. There are many of them in Belgium, but fortunately they are not yet lost to our society.

---

<sup>67</sup> As witness to this statement, a book published in Brussels by the city's Dutch-speaking free university in 2001 and discusses the rise and fall of radicalisation in Belgium (seen as leftist – liberal thought) without even mentioning Islam as a relevant issue. See Johan Basiliades, “De lotgevallen van het radicalisme in België. Het ontstaan, de opkomst en de ondergang van een negentiende-eeuwse links-liberale stroming”, in Sven Gatz and Patrick Stouthuysen (eds), *Een vierde weg? Links-liberalisme als traditie en als oriëntatiepunt*, Brussel: VUB Press, 2001, pp. 33-62.

## **Bibliography**

Arslan, E. 2004 'Turkish Ultra-nationalism in Germany: Its Transnational Dimension', in Thomas Faist and Eyüp Özveren (eds), *Transnational Social Spaces: Agents, Networks and Institutions*, Ashgate Publishing

Bousetta, H and Bernes, L-A. 2007. 'Muslims in the EU: Cities Report, Belgium', Open Society Institute, EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program, Brussels

Dassetto, F. 1988. *Le Tabligh en Belgique. Diffuser l'Islam sur les traces du Prophète*, Sydibi papers, Vol. 2, Academia, Louvain-la-Neuve

Dassetto, F. 1991. *Immigrés et communes. Equilibres difficiles. Le cas de Saint-Josse-ten-Noode*, Academia, Louvain-la-Neuve

Dassetto, F., Maréchal, B. and Ferrari, S., 2007. *Islam in the European Union: What's at stake in the future?*, study prepared for the European Parliament (IP/B/CULT/ST/2006\_061), May 2007 (PE 390.031)

Husain, E. 2007. *The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left*, Penguin Books, London

Kaya, A. and Kentel, F. 2007. *Belgian-Turks: A Bridge or a Breach between Turkey and the European Union?* King Baudouin Foundation, Brussels

Koutroubas, T. and Vloeberghs, W. 2008 'De l'identité imputée: à propos de l'islam comme appartenance ethnique', *La Revue Générale*, February 2008, pp. 33-38

Manço, U. 1997. 'Des organisations socio-politiques comme solidarités islamiques dans l'immigration turque en Europe', *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam*, Institut national des Langues et des Civilisations orientales, No. 4, pp. 97-133

Manço, U. 2001, *Populations musulmanes de Belgique et la stratification du marché du travail*, FUSL/CES, Brussels

Manço, U. and Kanmaz, M. 2005. 'From Conflict to Co-operation between Muslims and Local Authorities in a Brussels Borough: Schaerbeek', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31 (6), 2005, pp. 1105-1123

Manço, U. and Manço, A. 2000 'La scolarité des enfants issus de l'immigration musulmane: difficultés et actions positives', in U. Manço (ed.), *Voix et voies musulmanes de Belgique*, Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint Louis, Brussels

Maréchal, B. 2008 'Courants fondamentalistes en Belgique', *Journal d'étude des relations internationales au Moyen-Orient (MERIA)*, Vol. 3, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 65-78

Nielsen, J. 2004 *Muslims in Western Europe*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh

Open Society Institute, 2007, *Muslims in the EU: Cities Report*. EU Monitoring and Advocacy Programme, Belgium, Preliminary research report and literature survey

Torrekens, C. 2007. 'Concentration des populations musulmanes et structuration de l'associatif musulman à Bruxelles', *Brussels Studies*, No. 4, 5 March 2007, pp. 1-15