

# Counter-Islamophobia Kit

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**Workstream 1: Dominant Islamophobic Narratives - Belgium**

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**July 2017**

**Working Paper 9.1**

Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States.

**CIK Project (Counter Islamophobia Kit)**

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Working paper 9.1: Dominant Islamophobic Narratives – Belgium

CERS, 2017

*This publication has been produced with the financial support of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Dr Elsa Mescoli and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Commission*



Co-funded by the Rights, Equality  
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### **About the CIK Project**

The *Countering Islamophobia through the Development of Best Practice in the use of Counter-Narratives in EU Member States* (Counter Islamophobia Kit, CIK) project addresses the need for a deeper understanding and awareness of the range and operation of counter-narratives to anti-Muslim hatred across the EU, and the extent to which these counter-narratives impact and engage with those hostile narratives. It is led by Professor Ian Law and a research team based at the Centre for Ethnicity and Racism Studies, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, UK. This international project also includes research teams from the Islamic Human Rights Commission, based in London, and universities in Leeds, Athens, Liège, Budapest, Prague and Lisbon/Coimbra. This project runs from January 2017 - December 2018.

### **About the Paper**

This paper is an output from the first workstream of the project which was concerned to describe and explain the discursive contents and forms that Muslim hatred takes in the eight states considered in the framework of this project: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Portugal and United Kingdom. This output comprises eight papers on conditions in individual member states and a comparative overview paper containing Key Messages. In addition this phase also includes assessment of various legal and policy interventions through which the European human rights law apparatus has attempted to conceptually analyse and legally address the multi-faceted phenomenon of Islamophobia. The second workstream examines the operation of identified counter-narratives in a selected range of discursive environments and their impact and influence on public opinion and specific audiences including media and local decision-makers. The third workstream will be producing a transferable EU toolkit of best practice in the use of counter-narratives to anti-Muslim hatred. Finally, the key messages, findings and toolkits will be disseminated to policy makers, professionals and practitioners both across the EU and to member/regional audiences using a range of mediums and activities.

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### **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The aim of this working paper is to describe and explain the discursive content and forms that Muslim hatred takes in Belgium. We will first situate this research within the body of literature spread locally about Islamophobia, by taking into account institutions, scholars and associations. We will then give some overall information about Muslims in Belgium at the socio-demographic level, also pointing out the main forms of participation. Starting from the assumption that Islamophobia develops and performs in environments which are not neutral and which may impact the ways in which anti-Muslim attacks deploy, we will then try to describe the formation of anti-Muslim hatred in Belgium through a diachronic perspective, taking into account recently past and contemporary times. The description of the most dominant narratives of Muslim hatred in Belgium will follow, and it will be summed up through the categorical listing of the ten most relevant discourses within the concluding section of this working paper, also trying to ranking them in order of dominance, significance, impact and / or coverage. The main sources of data upon which this report is built include state agencies statistics, records and data bases (mainly from the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunity – UNIA), local associations and international NGOs reports (by Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium - CCIB, Muslim Rights Belgium – MRB, Amnesty International among others) and European bodies accounts (the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance – ECRI and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – FRA). A previous recent research report by the author of this working paper also served to provide for some data which has been verified and updated before adoption here<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This report has been written by Elsa Mescoli, anthropologist, post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Ethnic and Migration studies of the University of Liege (CEDEM, [e.mescoli@ulg.ac.be](mailto:e.mescoli@ulg.ac.be)), on the basis of previous research experiences and new investigations, as well as with the important contribution, in terms of further information and revisions, of Hassan Bousetta (CEDEM, [hassan.bousetta@ulg.ac.be](mailto:hassan.bousetta@ulg.ac.be)).

<sup>2</sup> See Mescoli, 2016. This report stemmed from a short-term fieldwork (October-December 2015) conducted in several Belgian cities among which Brussels and Liège.

## **2. State of the art in research on Islamophobia in Belgium**

In Belgium, research on Muslims originates in the early 1980s and it “[...] can therefore be characterized as fairly recent scholarship, which is strongly connected to recent public debates on Islam in Belgium”, differently from other countries where “an older Orientalist scholarship already existed due to former colonial ties (France or the Netherlands) or interactions with the Ottoman Empire (Germany)” (Fadil et al., 2014: 223). Within the framework of the *Société Belge d’Etudes Orientales* (Belgian Society of Oriental Studies, 1921-1989), studies mostly consisted of historical and archaeological accounts of Muslim societies or of textual analysis of Arabic language, leaving aside sociological issues related to Islam. When these issues were finally taken into account, two major tropes emerged converging discussions about Muslims in Belgium: “the question of socio-economic integration of Muslims and that of their compliance to the liberal and secular structure of dominant forms of citizenship” (Fadil et al., 2014: 223); questions that were dealt with by paying attention to regional and linguistic specificities within Belgium. The focus on these tropes reflects the trend of scholarship on Muslims in Europe of those times, which addressed Muslims either as economic (and low-skilled) migrants – thus through socio-economic lens – or as a religious minority faced from the perspective of contemporary secularism. Scholarship in Flanders remained largely focused on cultural and socio-economic integration, while the Francophone literature shifted to this second trope from the second half of the 1980s (Fadil et al., 2014: 228). The analysis of the socio-political organization of Muslim communities in the country – also including their negotiation process with state actors (see Bousetta, 2001) – started from the first study published by Dassetto and Bastenier in 1984.

Concerning anti-Muslim hatred, different Belgian actors deal with this issue using or critically addressing the term of Islamophobia<sup>3</sup> and thus producing knowledge from diverse perspectives. Scholars, associations and NGOs, state institutions are among them. Within the academic area, among the Belgian scholars who adopt the term of Islamophobia, Sami Zemni (Middle East And North Africa Research Group, Ghent University) describes it as the “culturalisation” of social problems (Zemni, 2011). This means that political and social problems “[...] are diluted in a culturalist explanation that targets Muslims’ unsuitable cultural and religious background as the reason for economic exclusion and marginalisation.” (Zemni, 2011: 29). This would happen because, in more general terms, economic, social and political problems of a society are described as generated or worsened by the presence of immigrants<sup>4</sup>, whose cultural differences would separate them from people who do not have a foreign origin and background and would put social integration at risk (Martiniello, 1996). In recent years, “it is Islam which is more and more often put in the dock” (Martiniello, 1995: 80; also see Allievi, 2005).

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<sup>3</sup> Even if the origin of this neologism has to be situated well before (Sayyid, 2014: 12), the diffuse use of it through Europe is linked to the report published in Great Britain in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust (Bousetta and Maréchal, 2003: 13).

<sup>4</sup> About the criminalization of immigration, please also refer to Bastenier and Brion, 2001.

The appropriateness and efficacy of the notion of islamophobia have been questioned by the scholars of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Islam in the contemporary World (CISCOW<sup>5</sup>). Felice Dassetto describes islamophobia as set of racist attitudes toward Islam; the etymology of this expression would recall a fear and an irrational rejection which would be, in principle, total (Dassetto, 2009: 13). Indeed, for this scholar islamophobia would not cover as many behaviours and facts as those associated to it by other actors. Its use would thus prevent from a real comprehension of all dynamics at stake and would put strain on intercultural relationships, finally showing the counterproductive character of this term (Maréchal *et al.*, 2016). In a similar opinion, Djelloul and Maréchal point out the ineffectiveness of “surfing on the wave called Islamophobia to denounce the society’s incoherencies” (2014: 98).

Worth of note within these debates is Nadia Fadil’s approach on issues related to islamophobia. Starting from the statement that islamophobia is “a contested concept, both in and outside of academia, which also accounts for the reluctance in its adoption” (Fadil *et al.*, 2014: 251), Fadil accounts for the political prevalence of this term as well as for the connection between acts associated to it and broader political issues. Indeed, her analysis brings interesting insights on “the persistent suspicion that rests over Muslims” (Fadil, 2016a: 2266). Fadil connects this suspicion and related acts of racism (such as those addressing the question of the veil) to issues of state sovereignty which place “these politico-theological questions [...] at the heart of political life” (Fadil, 2016a: 2266). Her approach invites to deal with the “Muslim question” as a point of entrance to examine broader and diffuse political matters, among which the reiteration of state sovereignty is a crucial one. This opens to new directions of studies on islamophobia and on racism in more general terms in the contemporary context: “[a] central challenge for a proper analysis of ‘race’ in a post-racial context seems, consequently, to reside in a persistent engagement with the relationship between sovereignty, race and religion and how the latter find new expressions in today’s troubled contexts” (Fadil, 2016a: 2266).

Within this main scholarly context, where the existence of divergent perspectives may lead to privilege other terms to Islamophobia, such as “discrimination against Muslims”, “stereotypical discourse and views on Islam and Muslims” (Amnesty international, 2012: 8), anti-Muslim sentiments (Fadil *et al.*, 2014: 251) etc., a number of other scientific studies focus on this issue. Here follows a non-exhaustive and rapidly described list:

- ISPO – Institute for the study of Political Organization), KU Leuven conducted in 2007 a post-election survey which addressed the issue of Islamophobia through indicators describing Belgian citizens’ opinion on anti-Muslims statements (Billiet *et al.*, 2012).
- Open Society Foundation commissioned a report on Muslims in Anvers by Noel Clycq, within which Islamophobia is defined as “irrational hostility, fear, and hatred of Islam, Muslims, and Islamic culture, and active discrimination towards this group as individuals or collectively” (2011: 16). The author describes discrimination based on different social features (religious or ethnic grounds) as diffuse experience among the respondents of the study.

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<sup>5</sup> In French *CISMOC*, *Centre interdisciplinaire d’études de l’Islam dans le monde contemporain*.

- SETA – Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research Report on European Islamophobia includes a chapter on Belgium by Amina Easat-Daas (2015). The author states that Islamophobia in Belgium is shaped by both internal and external factors, and during 2015, it was, in part, related to events in France, such as the terror attacks or scandals related to Muslim women's dress. She also points out the disproportionate effect of Islamophobia on Muslim women and young Muslims as well as the emergence of numerous counter-Islamophobia initiatives taken by these groups.
- Several studies financed by the King Baudouin Foundation address Muslim population in Belgium, mainly through studying the two main communities of foreign background composing it, i.e. Belgian-Turks and Belgian-Moroccans. The issue of Islamophobia is not always directly dealt with, but it appears in each of these studies under different viewpoints and with diverse implications in the research. More precisely, among the authors of these reports:
  - Ayhan and Kentel mention Islamophobia as one of the heterophobic discourses emerging in the contemporary times in Europe, beside the “clash of civilisations” or “cultural wars” discourses (2007: 12) and show that discrimination and racism are the two main problematic issues faced by Belgian-Turks (2007: 47).
  - In Bocquet et al.'s report (2014), Islamophobia is taken as object of discussion with the research informants, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Besides questioning the notion itself, meant as a “unilateral category” (2014: 10), the authors argue the increase of the importance of religious references, Muslim in particular, in schools, workplaces etc., fact which would have led to the emergence of tensions around sensitive subjects, such as wearing the veil, gender issues, geopolitical and historical revisions etc. This report was updated in 2015. Islamophobia is mentioned here merely as a term which is largely used but little questioned (Bocquet et al., 2015: 25) and it takes little room in a research mainly focused on reciprocal representations of Muslims and non-Muslims in Belgium and of interpersonal and inter-groups relationships.
  - In Torrekens and Adam's study (2015), Islamophobia is meant as “a particular form of fear and *a priori* concerning Islam and Muslims” whose increase in Europe has been highlighted by recent qualitative scientific literature. Indeed, this research tend to demonstrate that Belgian-Moroccans and Belgian-Turks feel discriminated “mainly on the basis of a ‘classic’ racializing interpretation of difference, i.e. [dealing] with origin and skin colour” (2015: 83, my translation). This would respond to the secularization process underway in Belgian society which would make the religious practice of people of Turkish and Moroccan origin exert mainly in the private sphere (2015: 205). In parallel, religiosity of these people once they are integrated in the job market would not cause them problems provided that it is not shown in visible ways and not brought on the workplace (2015: 206).

A quite large corpus of civil society literature addressing directly or indirectly the issue of Islamophobia includes:

- The Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities (UNIA) annual reports that overtly speak of Islamophobia and make this issue an integral part of their publications since 2008 (Centre, 2008). UNIA reports point out the prevalence of anti-Muslim acts within the complaints received both on a general level and concerning religious issues. As Fadil et al. state, “The [UNIA] 2012 report shows that Islamophobia figures as one of the primary grounds for concerns and complaints in 2011” and in the same year “164 of the 198 registered complaints about religious prejudices dealt with Islam, and the Centre considered that 58% of these complaints were clear evidences of Islamophobia” (UNIA, 2012b: 80-82, in Fadil et al., 2014: 251).
- The ENAR Shadow reports on racism in Europe generally denounce the increase of Islamophobic trends in various European countries among which Belgium. More specifically, they include: an assessment of the increase of Islamophobic acts in the 2013-2014 Racist Crime in Europe report (ENAR, 2014); a focus on Muslim communities and Islamophobia in the 2011/12 report, where it is stated that “Islamophobia is widespread and increasing prejudice towards Muslims is often greater than that experienced by other religious or ethnic minority groups. [...] Muslims continue to experience discrimination in all the collective areas covered in this report” (ENAR, 2012: 3); the statement that “Islamophobia continues to be on the rise in many European countries, fuelled by populist discourses by politicians and the media” (ENAR, 2011: 7; 2010). A particular attention to discrimination suffered by Muslim women is given in 2011-2012 (ENAR, 2012) and in 2012-2013 (ENAR, 2013) reports focused on Racism and discrimination in employment in Europe, where it is highlighted that Muslim women face double discrimination on the basis of both their religion and their gender. The European project “Forgotten women: the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women” led to a report specifically devoted to Islamophobia and gender including the Belgian case (ENAR, 2015). As far as the definition of Islamophobia in more general terms is concerned, ENAR describes it as:

“[a] specific form of racism that refers to acts of violence and discrimination, as well as racist speech, fuelled by historical abuses and negative stereotyping and leading to exclusion and dehumanisation of Muslims, and all those perceived as such. It is a form of racism in the sense that it is the result of the social construction of a group as a race and to which specificities and stereotypes are attributed, in this case real or perceived religious belonging being used a proxy for race.”<sup>6</sup>
- Several international NGOs reports include a focus on discrimination towards Muslims and address this issue within the Belgian context, among others. Amongst these, one which has an important impact on local debates and studies about Islamophobia is the Amnesty

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.enar-eu.org/Muslims-in-Europe-Questions-and>, accessed 19 April 2017.



International “Choice and Prejudice, Discrimination against Muslims in Europe” report, published in 2012. This report denounces that:

“Discrimination against Muslims in Europe is fuelled by stereotyped and negative views, which fail to take into account basic demographic and sociological factors such as the diversity of Muslim groups as well as their cultural and religious practices across the region. Regrettably, some political parties’ messages and the portrayal of Muslims in some sections of the media reinforce these views” (Amnesty, 2012: 5).

This leads to discrimination in employment and to the need of recommending States to respect their “obligation to take measures to prevent discrimination, not only by their own officials but also by private individuals or other non-state actors” (Amnesty, 2012: 6).

- Reports by local organizations include the annual activity reports of the Collective against Islamophobia in Belgium (CCIB), that describe Islamophobia as one among the contemporary forms of racism (2016: 2) made of three main dimensions: a socio-psychological dimension (determining fear of Islam based on an altered vision of it); a dimension connected with law and anti-racism and including violent and discriminating acts; a sociological dimension, pointing out the “construction of a Muslim problem” (CCIB, 2016: 6). CCIB presents a mapping of Islamophobia where discriminating acts are placed in a severity scale (CCIB, 2016: 5) and bases its analysis on complaints directly collected and of second hand data (coming from UNIA databases and reports, and from international NGOs reports). Muslims’ Right Belgium (MRB) also publishes annual reports (see for example MRB, 2012) assessing Islamophobia in French-speaking Belgium and relies its analysis on data collected from UNIA and through a web platform that MRB created to let people report Islamophobic acts<sup>7</sup>.

To conclude this state of the art in research on Islamophobia in Belgium, it is worth mentioning that this literature impacted the political domain, even if the triggered process did not result in concrete legal measures. In fact in 2013 the notion of Islamophobia, while it appeared in debates some years before, was object of a proposal of law recalling first the pertinence of the use of this notion on the basis of the 1997 Runnymede Trust report. Secondly, starting from the local civil society assessment of the increase of Islamophobia in Belgium, this proposal was formulated with the aim of combating Islamophobia by reinforcing the application of the legislation against racism and discrimination<sup>8</sup> with particular attention to this form of racism. The proposal aroused intense debates and criticism, and there was no following up of this measure, which remained unapproved.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://je-participe.be/>.

<sup>8</sup> Law of 10 May 2007 (MB 30.V.2007) modified by the law of 30 December 2009 (MB 31.XII.2009) and the law of 17 August 2013 (MB 5.III.2014, refer to [http://unia.be/files/Z\\_ARCHIEF/10\\_mai\\_2007.pdf](http://unia.be/files/Z_ARCHIEF/10_mai_2007.pdf), accessed 19 April 2017).

### **3. Background: Muslim population in Belgium**

According to Sayyid's typologies of "theatres" describing the Muslim presence in a state, we can define Belgium as one of those "territories where Muslims are represented mainly as immigrants" (Sayyid, 2014: 64-65). A first estimation of individuals originating from Muslim countries and living in Belgium dates back to the 1928 statistical report by the Turkish consul in Antwerp, counting 6000 people belonging to this category (Panafit, 1999). Even earlier, in 1910, there were some Muslim workers that came from the Maghreb to live in Belgium (Boussetta and Maréchal, 2003: 5). Besides brief operations by soldiers from the French colonies in southern-east Belgium during the Second World War, the presence of Muslim people in Belgium was consolidated from the signature of bilateral labour migration agreements with Morocco and Turkey in 1964, and with Tunisia and Algeria in 1967. Tens of thousands of workers migrated to Belgium to be employed in the coalmine, steel, and car industries (Fadil et al., 2014: 224) and they were encouraged to definitively settle, fact which led to important flows of people through family reunion<sup>9</sup>. In 1974, when Belgian borders were closed for foreign manual labour forces, Islam was settled among the recognized confessions in Belgium (see later), fact which transformed "the imaginary of temporary guest workers [...] into an imaginary of a 'foreign' minority settled in Belgium" (Fadil et al., 2014: 224). This process was also fostered by the fact that many migrants rapidly resort to acquiring Belgian citizenship, in particular after the 1985 Law Gol, which on the one hand facilitated the naturalization, in particular by establishing the *ius soli* for under 18-year-old foreigners born in Belgium from a Belgian parent; and on the other hand, it further limited the access to the Belgian territory and family reunion (Beyen and Destatte, 2008: 83).

The number of Muslim in Belgium cannot be precisely stated, in the absence of registration of religious or philosophical affiliations (Husson, 2015). Thus, several different estimations are produced with regard to this issue. They count between 250,000 and 400,000 (Torrekens, 2005: 56) and up to 630,000 Muslim people including converted persons. The sociologist Jan Hertogen regularly produces estimates<sup>10</sup> based on countries of origin – meaning that he considers as Muslims all people who have foreign origins located in a country with a prevalent Muslim background. He arrives at a figure of around 716,000 Muslims corresponding to 6.5% of the Belgian population (Hertogen, 2008), while other estimates adjust this percentage to 5-6% (Maréchal and El-Asri, 2012: 29). At least 55% of Muslims in Belgium (Amnesty, 2012: 12), up to 2/3 of them, have Belgian citizenship (Maréchal and El-Asri 2012: 29). Concerning the origins of Muslims who have a migrant background, they are mainly located in Morocco and Turkey.

At the end of the 1990s, most Muslims with Maghrebi origins lived in Brussels region, while Belgian-Turks settled mainly in Flanders (Manço, 2000: 27). In general terms, Muslim population with a migrant background is characterized from those times by a complete demographic configuration,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, 50,000 Maghrebi women moved to Belgium between 1961 and 1977, which amounts to half of the Maghrebi population which settled in Belgium (Morelli, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> These estimates are controverted and regularly trigger discussions on Hertogen's methodology by researchers fearing that any overestimation may feed some kind of "foreign invasion" fear (Husson, 2015). See for instance Dassetto, 2011: 21-26; Fadil, 2014b: 84-85.

with first, second and third generations (Manço, 2000: 25). A high proportion of young Muslims in attested in Belgium: in 2003, for example, around 35% of Turkish and Moroccans were under 18 years old (Boussetta and Maréchal, 2003: 8). Concerning socio-economic profiles, “Muslim minorities are primarily seen as an underprivileged ethnic group that faces a number of structural forms of exclusion such as unemployment, poverty, school drop-out, etc.” (Fadil et al., 2010: 229). This would be linked to a greater difficulty to access the job market for Turkish and Moroccan minorities, and of weaker academic careers in terms of education. Discrimination plays a crucial role in determining this situation, as accounted for by several reports (see for example Martens et al., 2005 concerning unequal treatment in employment).

### *Islam and state relationship*

The Belgian State is based on the principle of neutrality which consists on the one hand of the non-intervention in the nomination of religious officials and on the other hand in the official recognition (and equal treatment concerning funding and rights linked to education<sup>11</sup>) of six religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Anglicanism, Islam and Orthodox liturgy<sup>12</sup>. *Laïcité* is also recognised by the Belgian State as philosophical movement – thus diverging from the political model which characterizes, for example, France, and which determines restrictions on the relations between religion and state (Fadil et al., 2014: 234). *Laïcité* in Belgium is included among the possible choices in matter of convictional education programs at school (leading to the teaching of *morale laïque*). The State financially supports places of worship of recognised religions, according to the article 181 of the Belgian constitution<sup>13</sup>. Islam has been involved in this process since 1974 (see Husson, 2000), and state recognition and financial support meant from that moment the funding of mosques and the payment of salaries of the recognized imams and Muslim chaplains. This system of conditional recognition of Islam (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 89) means, generally speaking, “that Islam and Muslims find their place [...] on the basis of respect both for the principles of religious liberty (since exercising civil and political rights is independent of religious beliefs) and for the autonomy of religious organizations (non-interference in their doctrines and internal organization).” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014a: 90). Indeed, Belgian constitution also refrains from intervening in the internal organization of worship places and assembly, even if the institution of an official body representing Muslims in Belgium has been solicited by the state. In the early 1990s creating a more coherent migration policy, instead of regionally based legislation mostly concerning integration, became a concern at the federal political level, resulting in the establishment of the Royal

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<sup>11</sup> In Belgium at least 700 professors of Islamic religion are financed by the state (Maréchal et al., 2003; Nielsen et al., 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Buddhism is in the process of being recognized (Fadil et al., 2014: 235).

<sup>13</sup> The Belgian constitution also allows for the creation of Islamic schools within the framework of the “*Réseau libre confessionnel*”, i.e. the network of private confessional schools – co-founded by the state in the case of Catholic schools (Torrekens, 2005). Political debates emerge in contemporary times around the possibility to include *laïcité* in the Belgian constitution, fact which would change – among other – the established relationships between religions and state in the country.

Commissariat for Migration Policy in 1989, among whose tasks was “to ensure that the project of a representative body of Muslims was realized” (Fadil et al., 2014: 227). A first attempt of this process consisted of the *Conseil Supérieur des Musulmans de Belgique*, established by a Royal Decree by Minister Gol (1985), but later declared non-constitutional by the State council (Rea, 1999: 269). After that, in 1968 the Islamic Cultural Centre (ICC) was founded and functioned as non-official interlocutor to the state (Kanmaz and Zemni, 2008), in particular after the “[...] symbolic donation, in 1969, of the Oriental pavilion of the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels to the Saudi King Faisal, for the purpose of hosting [the Centre]” (Fadil et al., 2014: 225). This process finally determined the creation of the *Exécutif des Musulmans de Belgique*: EMB is in charge of negotiating with Belgian institutions on behalf of Muslims since the end of the 1990s<sup>14</sup>. EMB was established following a general election among Muslim communities held in 1998. EMB is accounted for being the first representative body for Muslims in Western Europe (Fadil et al., 2014: 236). Fadil et al. report problematic concerns about representativity and legitimacy of this body:

“Several analysts observed that the EMB never entirely achieved a degree of ‘moral legitimacy’, as both internal and external actors keep challenging its operation and decision-making process (Dassetto, 2011: 78). [...] the institutional requirements of the Belgian law are modelled on the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church and ill adapted to the heterogeneous composition of the Muslim community (Foblets and Overbeeke 2002; Panafit 1999; Kanmaz and Zemni 2008). A representative body, therefore, implies the establishment of a structure that is capable of integrating various ideological tendencies and ethnic groups within the community in order to achieve full representation. While ethnic diversity within the community has been taken into account (through ethnic quota), the doctrinal heterogeneity remains unaddressed (Maréchal, 2003: 165).” (Fadil et al., 2014: 236)<sup>15</sup>.

The ethnic diversity of Muslims in Belgium is also reflected in the association of mosques to migrants’ communities. Mosques were accounted for a total number of 328 in 2004 (El Battiui et al., 2004), including 162 mosques in Flanders, 77 in the Brussels region and 89 in Wallonia. Of which 162 mosques were predominantly Arabic speaking, while 134 conducted religious affairs in Turkish (the remaining ones were associated to other communities). In general terms, the Turkish sponsored *Diyanet* (Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs) plays a strong role in the religious organization of the Turkish Muslim community. The *Widadiya* exerted a similar impact, in the recent past, on Maghrebi community (Fadil et al., 2014: 225; Bousetta, 2001).

Concerning the visibility of Islam and Muslim communities in Belgium, we can assume that the historical process defining it, as in other states of Western Europe, remains unfinished (Martiniello

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed chronology, see: <http://www.embnet.be/ORCMB/HistoriquedelEMB/tabid/357/Default.aspx>.

<sup>15</sup> The authors also point out the strong interventionist role adopted by the national authorities with regard to the establishment of a representative body for Muslims, mentioning for example the non-recognition of the 1991 elections organized by the ICC, as well as the screenings implemented after the 1998 elections which resulted in the exclusion of some candidates (Fadil et al., 2014: 237).

et al., 2007). This is strictly linked to the fact that, as Gjelloul and Maréchal point it recalling Jonker and Amiraux (2006):

“[...] public visibility is related to the opportunities offered by a context and a specific institutional landscape wherein processes constructing the imaginaries and reciprocal representations intervene too. [...] Thus [...] performance on a public stage [occurs] where everyone has the opportunity of considering “alterity,” and physically meeting one another.” (Gjelloul and Maréchal, 2014b: 90)

Following up with this statement, we observe that the visibility of Islam in Belgium shapes in an overdetermined framework of social forces where crucial for interactions is the reciprocal definition of one's (and one group's) interlocutors as *other* than the considered (individual or collective) self. This influences, among other, the participation of Muslim people in the socio-economic life as well as in the political life of the country, where ethnicization and its outcomes in terms of culturalization of interpersonal and inter-groups interactions seems to prevail. This process entails the fact that Muslims in Belgium often:

- move within a highly segmented labour market where ethnicity is one among the factors determining such segmentation;
- are engaged in the creation of ethno-religiously based associations;
- participate in the political life through being intercepted by processes of political communitarization as well as of attribution of community relevance or communitarian aims to political proposals.

As recalled above, the socio-economic integration of Muslims in Belgium has been addressed by several studies, pointing out the difficulties encountered to enter the labour market and consolidate their position within it. Addressing this issue on the ground of ethnicity, and considering facts related to the two larger communities of Muslims in Belgium (Moroccans and Turks) as examples of this situation, we report that Turkish migrants are employed in sectors where a low level of education is required (Wets 2006) and, in order to combat unemployment, they have often opted for self-employment by opening ethnic businesses, among other things. The interaction between the segmented labour market and ethnicity may also highlight the fact that educated Moroccans have difficulty to access positions that match their qualifications (Gsir et al., 2015: 44).

Concerning Muslim associations (including those associated to mosques), their number is constantly increasing (Husson, 2015). Besides those devoted to fighting Islamophobia (such as the *Collectif contre l'islamophobie en Belgique* – CCIB founded in 2014 and Muslim Rights Belgium – MRB established in 2012), other associations and federations of all sizes developed, making up a very dynamic Muslim civil society (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). The following overview is not intended to account for all of them, but just to give some relevant examples of this dynamism. These associations are organized along ethnic lines, mainly Turkish and Moroccan ones. As recalled above, the most influential Turkish Islamic movement is a Belgian spin-off of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (*Belçika Türk İslam Diyanet Vakfı*), known as *Diyanet* (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009).

The second Turkish Islamic group is the religious political movement *Millî Görüş* (lit. “denominational vision”) represented by the Islamic Federation of Belgium (*Belçika İslam Federasyonu*) (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). Concerning Moroccan religious associations and mosques in Belgium, they are not organised along ideological lines as strongly as its Turkish counterpart, but they have banded together into unions by province such as: the Antwerp union (Unie der Moskeeën en Islamitische Verenigingen van Antwerpen, *UMIVA*) for the Dutch-speaking region and the Brussels-Brabant union (Union des Mosquées de Bruxelles-Brabant Wallon, *UMBB*) for the francophone region of the country (Manço and Kanmaz, 2009). In 2002 these regional unions came together to form the Federation of Mosque Unions or FUM (French abbreviation). Some other associations established around shared interests across ethnic belonging and in line with religious affiliation, such as the *Rassemblement des musulmans de Belgique*, aimed at promoting dialogue with other religions and previously directed by the actual president of EMB; the Islamic Relief Belgium, linked to the international humanitarian NGO; the *Association Belge des Professionnels Musulmans*, developing contacts among Muslim professionals; the platform Empowering Belgian Muslims (EmBem), promoting cooperation and empowerment within Muslim communities; the Forum Of European Muslim Youth And Student Organisations; the European Muslim Network (EMN), aimed at fostering communication and analysis on issues related to Muslims in Europe; the association *Merhaba*, aimed at promoting LGBT rights.

In terms of generations’ involvement in this associative dynamism, Djelloul and Maréchal (2014: 94) report that first generation men have a most relevant role with regard to the management of mosques, while young people’s intervention is required for specific aims, such as collecting public fund – as also Allievi (2009) shows. Among the results of this situation is these youths’ investment in founding new associations, whose varied socio-cultural goals determine actions such as: “organizing talks, setting up or following school or extracurricular activities, investment in humanitarian activities or cultural events centered on awareness of Islam, etc.” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 94). According to Djelloul and Maréchal, despite the fact that these activities are quite often put in place as much by young women as men, mixed associations would remain proportionally rare (2014b: 94). Indeed, some other analyses report that more and more women are engaging in the associative sector (Ben Mohammed, 2006). Besides teaching and other cultural activities, we find associative actions aimed at converting experiences of discrimination in means through which developing support systems useful for other women, in terms of financial assistance, collective campaigns, making life experiences visible etc. (Mescoli, 2016).

Religion enters these dynamics – connected to a certain extent to ethnicity – in terms both of assignments and proactive identification and claims. Concerning Muslims’ participation in the political life, Zibouh (2010) and Nielsen (2013) show that “a common reference to Islam can function as a lever in mobilizing one or more networks and stimulating the constitution of an ethnic and/or religious vote”<sup>16</sup> (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 96). The political force of Muslims is generated by an

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<sup>16</sup> The political participation in terms of voting at the national and regional level is linked – and then begins in correspondence with – the naturalization of migrants. This also concerns the engagement

important demographic weight particularly in urban areas (Fadil et al., 2014: 238), which leads, among others results, to a gradual but considerable increase of the number of MPs for example in the Brussels parliament, which started with 5.3% in 1995, growing to 12% in 1999, to 19.1% in 2004, and to 21.3% in 2009 (Zibouh, 2011: 5). A “process of political integration of Muslims”, as Maréchal and El-Asri put it (2012: 20) began in 1994. Subsequently, people with foreign origins are elected in town councils (Maréchal and El-Asri, 2012: 20). Djelloul and Maréchal explain that:

“[...] Muslims political mobilization efforts are usually concretized within and to the advantage of traditional political parties, given that, if the religious dimension of elected Muslim officials has usually hardly produced spectacular effects in this domain, that dimension may sometimes appear to be more clearly affirmed than in the early 2000s.” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 95)

The religious dimension only rarely results in founding Muslim parties, apart from some few initiatives, such as the Noor party (1999) which became the Islam Party in Belgium in 2012 (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 95); the “*Parti de la Citoyenneté et de la Prospérité* (PCP)”, stemming from the “*Mouvement des Jeunes musulmans* (MJM)”; the “Resist” Party, stemming from the European Arab league by Abou Jahjah (Bousetta and Maréchal, 2003: 20)<sup>17</sup>. These diverse forms of the political participation of Muslims in Belgium shaped the emergence of a new political entity converging Muslim elites and articulating various claims towards local or national authorities (Bousetta, 2001). These mobilization strategies exert through visible or dominant political channels (e.g. trade unions, political parties, etc.) (Fadil et al., 2014: 238), as well as through networks within Muslim communities – the “infra-political domain” (Bousetta, 2001). For example, a younger and more educated generation of Muslim social actors can specialize in the strict administrative criteria regulating political participation and can act as negotiators with local authorities to make them meet certain Muslim demands (Torrekens, 2008: 173). Additionally, mosques can emerge as alternative public spheres to let Muslims play a role in the civic and political local and national life (Fadil et al., 2014: 239). Lastly, international networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood may establish locally through the foundation of Muslim organizations in which new forms of Muslim identity are shaped drawing on active participation within society (Maréchal, 2008b: 62-63).

#### **4. Background: the formation of anti-Muslim hatred**

Approaching Islamophobia through a first description of the local background where it shapes is in line with the IHRC Domination Hate Model of Intercultural Relations (Ameli et al., 2012) which conceptualizes Muslim hate crime within a context of interlocking hate environments. These are environments in which Islamophobic and racist acts “may be encouraged and legitimized” and they include “discriminatory legislation resulting in social inequality and negative media representation of

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in political parties and elections procedures (with the exception that non-Belgian EU citizens can be elected in municipal councils).

<sup>17</sup> For further details concerning these parties, please refer to Bousetta and Maréchal, 2003.

Muslims” (Ameli et al., 2012:2). Such environments develop through years before taking their contemporary form – which is indeed constantly redefining –, as we will try to recall briefly with regard to the Belgian context.

In general terms, several scholars point out the link between acts of discriminations addressed toward Muslims and the diffused view that would cause them and that consists of the identification of Muslims to the (cultural and religious) Other. This would have shaped gradually through decades, and the contemporary facts would just be a continuation of this process. With regard to this perspective, we remind of the founding work of Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* (1978) showed how “the Oriental” has been discursively created through representations which fed this image across disciplines within the Western scholarly context – particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and served specific socio-economic and political aims. This process would have direct connections with the contemporary issues that we are here studying, since “the history of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the West [...] is immediately reflected in the history of Orientalism” (Said, 1978: 34).

This happens even if Belgium never confronted to Islam within the framework of its colonial history; differently from France or Britain, there is no “colonial contentious” that combines with contemporary issues concerning Islam in Belgium, while this occurs in other countries where relationships with Muslims would be more complex in reason of a common past (Maréchal, 2008a: 65).

Muslims in European societies gradually “incarnate[d] the face of the Other” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 92) and facts such as the recent attacks associated to groups claiming an Islamic basis of their acts which occurred in the US and Europe only give further opportunities to reiterate orientalist discourses and thus reinforce this perception. The consequence is that “strains were sometimes exacerbated to the point of engendering Islamophobic feelings and/or attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, who were seen as representing the antithesis of Europe and its values” (Djelloul and Maréchal, 2014: 93). This process also concerns Belgium, where local or international events nourished discourses negatively representing Muslims through essentializing some practices assigned to Islam and thus leading to different forms of diffuse discrimination. These discourses often accompany the actions implemented by state organs to protect Belgian population from violent attacks of this kind. Fadil et al. (2014) write:

“The fear of radical Islam in Belgium dates from at least the mid-1980s, when the [...] demonstration against US military interventions in Libya took place in Brussels<sup>18</sup>. The main catalysts for this fear, however, were the World Trade Center attacks in September 2001, after which a concern with international terrorism increased significantly, and several networks were dismantled and individuals arrested. [...] The shifting local and international context has resulted in countless newspaper articles, documentaries, and statements by public commentators on the danger of ‘radical Islam’ – a discursive shift which also feeds into what

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<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of this event and of its mediatization, see Dassetto and Bastenier, 1987.



analysts have called the growing *securitization* of Islam (Cesari 2009).” (Fadil et al., 2014: 248-249).

If these operations concerned in some cases individuals accused of directly plotting an attack<sup>19</sup>, in other cases they “targeted groups or individuals who were accused of international terrorism in a broad sense, according to the 2004 anti-terrorism law” (Fadil et al., 2014: 248). This resulted in imprisonments ordered despite a lack of evidences<sup>20</sup>. The *securitization* of Islam also takes the form of various investigations of “radical and fundamentalist Islam” in Belgium which made tangible the idea of the proximity of “a global Muslim terrorist threat” (Fadil et al., 2014: 249)<sup>21</sup>. More precisely, and with specific regard to the Belgian context, these discourses are increasingly framed in terms of “radicalization” of Muslims, meaning with that “a growing sympathy of Muslims for ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘radical’ Islam” and recurrent references to ideas such as “Islamic revolution” or “Muslim state” (Fadil et al., 2014: 225). This view, particularly spread in contemporary times, is indeed not new. The link established between radicalization in Belgium, particularly of youths, and social exclusion and marginalization<sup>22</sup>, make us associate its roots to the debates around the issue of integration of migrants enhanced after the 1980 state reform impacting regional migration policies. Fadil et al. describe this process:

“In the Francophone part of the country an elaborate political and media discourse that ‘other’ migrants, notably through the lens of ‘radicalization’, developed. This discourse is influenced by the Francophone intellectual debates (in France and the postcolonial Maghreb region) where concerns about radical Islam were prominent since the late 1970s (Kepel 1987: 198).” (Fadil et al., 2014: 226).

In Flanders too, the issue of integration of migrants was rapidly turned into an urgent political question and at the federal level this led to the already recalled dynamics which determined the settlement of a representative body for Muslims in Belgium. In particular, the Royal Commissariat for Migration Policy established in 1989 (succeeded in 1993 by the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism (today Interfederal Centre, UNIA) claimed the necessity of such an organism to address fears of radicalization (Dassetto, 1997; Leman and Renaerts, 1996) and to foster “a Belgian Islam that would be acceptable to all” (Fadil et al., 2014: 237). Integration is a challenge in which it addresses “the ‘radical’ tendencies within Islam” in order to avoid their attempts to Belgian liberal

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<sup>19</sup> For example Nizar Trabelsi, a former professional football player arrested in September 2001 (Fadil et al., 2014: 248).

<sup>20</sup> This concerned for example some Moroccan-Belgians accused of supporting the *Groupe Islamique Combattant Marocain* considered responsible for the Madrid attacks in 2004 (Fadil et al., 2014: 248).

<sup>21</sup> Fadil et al. recall on this issue the journalistic investigations of life experiences by Hind Frahi (2006), Arthur Van Amerongen (2008), Chris De Stoop (2010) and Claude Moniquet (2015, also Chief Executive Officer of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, ESISC) as well as the advocacy work of Grignard (2008) (Fadil et al., 2014: 249).

<sup>22</sup> Besides scientific and journalistic works that will be mentioned later, this link has been made largely known through the piece of theatre *Djihad* by Ismaël Saidi (2015).

democracy (Fadil et al., 2014: 229). This perspective on integration coped with discourses on radicalization directly influence the state reactions – through local authorities – to Muslim claims, as Fadil et al. highlight on the basis of Torrekens’ research (2009): “While forced and compelled to accommodate and engage with Muslim claims – not least considering their electoral weight<sup>[23]</sup> – a manifest or latent hostility towards the growing visibility of Muslims nevertheless impedes a consistent, open, and constructive engagement.” (Fadil et al., 2014: 239).

Within this discursive context, that impact policies concerning directly or indirectly Muslims – and Muslims with migrant background in particular – a variety of narratives of Muslim hatred shape, fed and legitimated by the spread of shared negative perceptions of Islam and of issues and individuals related and associated to it, as we described in this section of our report.

## **5. Most dominant narratives of Muslim hatred in Belgium**

Following Sayyid’s performative approach to Islamophobia and the necessity to produce “action-able knowledge” (2014: 12), this section aims at “elucidate[ing] the kind of behaviors that can potentially be understood through deployment of the category [of Islamophobia]” (Sayyid 2014: 15). Sayyid identifies six performatives clusters of Islamophobic activities describing a range of expressions of Muslim hatred: attacks on persons perceived to be Muslims; attacks on property considered to be linked to Muslims; acts of intimidation; “[acts] which may occur in institutional settings, in which those perceived to be Muslims receive less favourable treatment than their peers in comparative positions [...]”; “[...] incidents in which there is a sustained and systematic elaboration of comments in the public domain that disparage Muslims and/or Islam”; state activities such as the “intensification of surveillance of Muslim populations using technology, agent provocateurs, and paid informers” (Sayyid 2014: 15-16)<sup>24</sup>. Starting from the study of islamophobic acts occurring in Belgium, we identified the main narratives of hatred upon which these acts rely or that they engender. The expression “narrative of hatred” thus functions here as discriminating discourse specifically addressed toward people associated to Islamic religious belonging. Sayyid’s typologies and the semantic area that they define around the notion of Islamophobia considered in its performative scope, are of help to identify narrative of Muslim hatred in Belgian context. These narratives are deployed in three main overlapping domains:

- a) Politics / political discourse / policies domain
- b) Mass-media domain
- c) Everyday life domain

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<sup>23</sup> Torrekens’ study referred in particular to the municipality of Brussels.

<sup>24</sup> This analytical range does not necessarily correspond to a parallel set of acts of discrimination recognized at the law level, since the European directives – and local laws based on them – on this issue do not necessarily acknowledge for the occurrence of the conditions for sanctioning them as such.

These domains overlap to the extent that narratives issued from one context may have an impact on experiences related to another one, since they all perform within an overall discursive framework that we already analysed and that contributes to keep connected all the practices involved, notwithstanding the social level where they occur. Thus, the following division of the gathered narratives into sections only serve organizational and analytical purposes and in any cases it does not mean to neglect this connection. An estimation of their relative scope will be proposed in the conclusion of this report.

*a) Politics / political discourse / policies domain*

Islam legitimates extreme forms of women oppression: on the anti-burqa law

In spite of the small number of face-veiled women in Belgium – no more than a hundred, according to Fadil (2006) – the state has adopted an anti-burqa law in 2011. The historical period when this happened was that of “a communitarian institutional crisis which paralyzed political life at a federal level for more than a year and created large divisions between the francophone and the Flemish political elite” (Fadil, 2014a: 251). Indeed, the newly elected federal chamber put the approval of this law as a priority, and those divisions did not impede an almost unanimous vote in its favour<sup>25</sup>. The attempts to counter this law remain vain till today, since neither the Belgian constitutional court nor the European court of Human Rights has sanctioned it<sup>26</sup>. According to Fadil, such a law is one among the tools of the state used to “produce and regulate the political subjectivity of [...] minorities” and “this as part and parcel of a process of maintaining and sustaining a cultural and political hegemony within the nation” which responds to a moral “anxiety over the potential loss of hegemony in defining the contours of the nation state” (Fadil, 2014a: 251; also refer to Appadurai, 2006 and Povinelli, 1998). Face veiling would represent a minority practice which provokes such anxiety and triggers reactions based on the perception that human values (including dignity) would be under threat. In this case this process concerns women, and thus shapes in line with some universalistic feminist discourses emerged in the Western world (Mohanty, 1984) that describe veiling (and face veiling in particular) as a means to perpetuate the overspread women oppression which has emerged in patriarchal societies where seclusion, segregation and disempowerment regulate the gender

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<sup>25</sup> To give an idea of the disproportionate scope of this issue and of the importance attributed to this law, may we mention that a lawyer working at UNIA has recently been dismissed of her charge for having expressed her doubts about the necessity of such law (see <http://www.lesoir.be/1473802/article/actualite/belgique/2017-04-03/unia-licence-rachida-lamrabet-suite-ses-propos-sur-burqa>, accessed 20 April 2017).

<sup>26</sup> See the decisions on the Belcacemi and Oussar case at the State constitutional level on 6 December 2012 (<http://www.const-court.be/public/n/2012/2012-145n.pdf>) and at the European Human Rights level on 11 July 2017 ([https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{\"itemid\":\[\"001-175141\"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{\)); a similar judgement delivered on the same date concerns the Dakir case: [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{\"itemid\":\[\"001-175139\"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{\)).

dynamics both in private and public spheres. These discourses, not taking into account cultural relativism, shape an ethnocentric “rhetoric of saving Muslim women” (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785) and do not allow a platform for subaltern voices (Spivak, 1988) which could bring different perspectives on the gender dynamics at play. The societal discourse surrounding these practices (Brems et al., 2014: 94) also includes arguments on the supposed anti-social character of wearing a face veil, pointed as “a ‘break from “living in a community” (*le vivre-ensemble*), from public responsibility and citizenship, and from communal ties [Parliamentary report, Chamber 2010-11, no. 53-219/4, 6]” (Brems et al., 2014: 94). Further discriminating statements reinforce the idea of the veil as disrupting the local social environment (“They [general population] do not wish to encounter something like that in the street”, Parliamentary proceedings, Chamber 2010-11, 28 April 2011, no. 53-30,35, in Brems et al., 2014: 94) and as undermining locally (and universally) recognized social values. Face veiling thus emerges as anti-Western posture (Fadil, 2016b) and its clear and standardised regulation at the national level is shaped as an urgent issue. This narrative is strictly linked to another one – that will be discussed later – which exerts across the three domains here considered and which shapes stereotypical and discriminating images of Muslim women, leading not only to laws as the anti-burqa ban, but also to other forms of discriminations impacting the everyday life of several Muslim women.

#### Islam is (and Muslims are) a problem for Western societies: anti-terrorism and anti-radicalization policies

We consider anti-terrorism and anti-radicalization policies as narratives of hatred because their visibility – emphasized not only through media, but also through reiterated practices in the public space – plays a crucial role in shaping an environment of hate toward Muslims and this determines concrete effects on their everyday life. Through a recent report<sup>27</sup> UNIA analysed the impact of terrorist attacks and of the policies adopted to fight terrorism on the number and type of complaints concerning Muslims collected by this organism and associated either to a general climate of fear or to precise measures.

Concerning anti-terrorism policies in particular, several veiled Muslim women interviewed within the framework of the already cited ENAR report on Islamophobia and gender (Mescoli, 2016) reported that they got searched by the police many times after the events occurred in 2015 in France and the climate of alert consequently created in Belgium. This happened while they were on their usual way to work or home and without any evident reason. The practice of “ethnic profiling” has been object of recent inquiry by the Human Rights League in Belgium (LDH). LDH reports that 78% of the 45 records of discrimination concerning the police that UNIA registered in 2015 were related to racial criteria (LDH, 2016: 22). In spite of being illegal with regard to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, ethnic profiling is recurrent in Belgium, as the Fundamental Rights Agency denounces (2010), pointing out that identity controls are much more numerous within ethnic minorities than the overall population and that they more often include body

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<sup>27</sup> See [http://unia.be/files/TERAD\\_Fr.pdf](http://unia.be/files/TERAD_Fr.pdf), published in June 2017.

search (LDH, 2016: 23). This fact generates a feeling of humiliation which increases when searches occur in public space. Ethnic profiling is the result of precise and discriminating institutional and criminal policies (LDH, 2016: 49), toward which individuals' complaints seem ineffective. Recent anti-terrorism policies impact police and military forces' resorting to ethnic profiling practices addressed to Muslims in which they put pressure on them and legitimate any means of control and prevention provided that they are successful.

Concerning anti-radicalization policies, they are based on the discursive construction of Islam as a problem for western society, and radicalisation would be one of the various forms that this problem takes. Because it is object of debates within the political and scientific domains, a social phenomenon emerges and it brings to question more general issues that were discussed since long, such as the place of religion in Western society and the possibility or not that Islam can integrate in it (Fadil, 2016b). Following Fadil and analysing this process in Foucauldian terms, the issue at stake here is the capacity of the state to subject its population through normalising practices and against the threat of a breach in the established order. Categorising those who could be responsible for this breach is aimed at making the state emerge as sovereign authority to deal with the issue concerned. This process of categorization of the "Muslim problem" and of its forms is at the basis of the anti-radicalization policies implemented in Belgium.

Since the concept of "radical" the related idea of "radicalism" has already existed since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Fadil, 2016b) and , the categorizing notion of radicalization emerges in the Netherlands in 2002 in the AIVD (General Intelligence and Security Service) report concerning 2001 activities (AIVD, 2002) and it largely spread after the murder of the film director Theo Van Gogh in 2004. The use of this notion consolidates in Belgium at least from 2012, in Flanders first<sup>28</sup>, to describe a process that aims at bringing deep changes within society by non-democratic means, and thus that represents a threat for the democratic order (Fadil, 2016b). Radicalisation would stem from a "socialisation process in which group dynamics (kinship and friendship) are most important than ideology" (Coolsaet, 2016: 12). Already before this significantly different discursive adoption, the state, in order to address radicalism, besides re-orienting part of the work of the two intelligence and security services active in Belgium<sup>29</sup>, implemented some policies aimed at dealing with it in specific ways. Among these policies, the federal Plan-R (*Plan d'action Radicalisme*, Action Plan Radicalism) was settled in 2004 (and actualised in 2015) after some local regulations that concerned the municipality of Molenbeek and Maaseik (Fadil, 2016b). Its implementation is coordinated by the OCAM (*Organe de coordination pour l'analyse de la menace*, Coordination Unit for Threat Analysis) and it includes some task forces settled at the national level (TFN, *Task Force Nationale*), at the

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<sup>28</sup> The corresponding Flemish word is *radicalisering*.

<sup>29</sup> State Security (*Sûreté de l'État*) is the civil intelligence service under the main authority of the Minister of Justice; the General Intelligence and Security Service (*Service général du renseignement et de la sécurité*, SGRS) is the military intelligence service placed under the authority of the Minister of Defense.

federal level (*Task Force du Gouvernement fédéral*) and at the local level (TFL, *Task Force Locales*)<sup>30</sup>. The main objective of this plan is to establish concertation among different state services in order to reduce the impact of radicalism. This would occur through identifying the sources of radicalization processes and to take both proactive and reactive measures to deal with them.

This and other related measures are regularly reaffirmed through diverse political means, such as the Federal Government Agreement and the Political Note of the Minister of Security and Home Affairs, both issued in 2014 with the aim at reinforcing security policies against radicalism<sup>31</sup>. In the same direction go the different versions of the National Plan of Security (*Plan national de sécurité*) published every four years by the Ministers of Home Affairs and Justice and designed to guarantee the correct functioning of the federal and local police, their reciprocal cooperation and the collaboration with justice. Moreover, in 2015 the government issued two further plans (*Plan en 12 points* and *Plan en 18 points*) aimed at introducing more severe security measures, including the enlargement of the possibilities of withdrawal of Belgian nationality from Belgians of foreign origin<sup>32</sup>. This issue in particular has been object of controversy and has generated great discomfort among these people, as it reinforced and eternalized the idea of an incomplete citizenship to which they are entitled and it reminded them of the precariousness of their status.

Anti-radicalization policies also include several recent local initiatives, such as the political and practical engagement taken by the administration of some Flemish municipalities (Mechelen, Anvers, Vilvoorde and Maaseik) in 2013 toward this issue<sup>33</sup>. At the regional level, we can mention as an example the recent Brussels-Capital Region Global plan of prevention and fight against radicalism (*Plan global de prévention et de lutte contre le radicalisme*, 2015); we also remind of the creation, before that, of the Brussels observatory for prevention and security (*Observatoire bruxellois pour la Prévention et la Sécurité*, OBPS, 2010). More recently (2016), the *Plan Canal* has been approved to strengthen police force and surveillance of people suspected of terrorism, their families, but also mosques and other buildings, in eight municipalities of Brussels<sup>34</sup>. At the community level, we can

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<sup>30</sup> Besides these, further state organisms are settled to face the “terrorist threat”, such as the National security council (*Conseil national de sécurité*, CNS), replacing in 2015 the *Comité ministériel du reinsegnement et de la sécurité*; the Radicalism Unit (*Unité Radicalisme*) established in 2014 within the ministry of Home Affairs; a temporary commission terrorism has been created at the Chamber in 2015; a Radicalization commission has been constituted in 2015 within the Senate.

<sup>31</sup> The documents are available at the following internet addresses: <http://www.premier.be/fr/accord-de-gouvernement> and <http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/0588/54K0588016.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> In order to implement these measures, some law amendments were issued. Among them, the Art. 23/2, §3, was introduced through the law of 20 July 2015 in the Code of Belgian Nationality.

<sup>33</sup> See [https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/handleiding\\_beheersen\\_van\\_moslimradicalisering.pdf](https://www.kennisplein.be/Documents/handleiding_beheersen_van_moslimradicalisering.pdf), accessed 9 March 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, Bruxelles-Ville, Koekelberg, Schaerbeek, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, Anderlecht, Saint-Gilles, Vilvorde.

mention the “Initiatives of prevention of radicalism and of good living together” (*Initiatives de prévention du radicalisme et du bien vivre ensemble*)<sup>35</sup> of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (2015) and the “Action plan for the prevention of radicalization processes that can lead to extremism and terrorism”<sup>36</sup> of the Flemish Community (2015).

The general discourse which informs these policies is that radicalization would constitute a most probable path which young Muslims may pursue if they find themselves in unfair and precarious social situations. Experiencing a feeling of injustice and social frustration, together with the lack of perspective for their future because of the discrimination they are object of, would make these people vulnerable in front of Islamist recruiters and susceptible to fall into their trap. Describing this youth’s shared “‘no-future’ subculture”, Coolsaet writes:

“[...] frequently they refer to the absence of a future, to personal difficulties they faced in their everyday life, to feelings of exclusion and an absence of belonging, as if they didn’t have a stake in society. They are often solitary, isolated adolescents, frequently at odds with family and friends, in search of belonging and a cause to embrace. At a certain point, the accumulation of such estrangements resulted in anger.” (Coolsaet, 2016: 3).

This discourse makes local social agents become crucial actors in the implementation of anti-radicalization policies, moved by a general aim of maintaining or restoring social cohesion<sup>37</sup> and a specific objective of preventing, identifying and stopping radicalization processes active among young Muslim people. Social agents’ role was rapidly highlighted after the discursive emergence of the notion of radicalization, as it happens after the imprisonment of around a hundred Muslim people who participated to a non-authorized protest organized in 2012 in Anvers against the film “Innocence of Muslims”<sup>38</sup>. Fadil (2016b) recounts that as punishment, these people were ordered to pay administrative fines or to accept to be interrogated by the municipality’s social agents. The declarations that followed by these agents contribute to acknowledge for the existence of the radicalization process and of the reach of the problem. In this and other situations, the reliability of social agents’ perspective is based on their being on the field near the communities under study. Their potential role in transmitting relevant information to security organs – beyond professional secret, whose terms and their eventual redefinition are being discussed by the government at least since 2016 – is considered crucial, as well as their advantaged position to monitor the developments of the process of radicalization and to prevent its further spread. Social agents, besides focusing

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://gouvernement.cfwb.be/sites/default/files/nodes/story/7066-pptpreventionradicalisme.pdf>, accessed 10 March 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See [http://www.vlaanderen.be/int/sites/iv.devflh.vlaanderen.be.int/files/documenten/actieplan\\_radicalisering\\_eng.pdf](http://www.vlaanderen.be/int/sites/iv.devflh.vlaanderen.be.int/files/documenten/actieplan_radicalisering_eng.pdf), accessed 10 March 2017.

<sup>37</sup> The Flemish city of Mechelen is reported to be a model in terms of prevention as effective approach to radicalization (see the city representatives’ declarations here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZagfZiflepA>, accessed 10 March 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Some people affiliated to the group Sharia4Belgium participated to this initiative.

particular attention on this issue within the framework of their regular work and services offered to the overall population, may also be enrolled in special services established to fight radicalism, as that settled in the municipality of Verviers (SAFER, *Service d'Accompagnement des Familles et de l'Entourage en matière de Radicalisme*)<sup>39</sup>.

Islamic belonging (claimed or assigned) is a prior identity marker: on the intellectual and political discrediting of Muslim representatives

The experiences of some Muslims doing intellectual work within Belgian society that have been collected in previous research show how people associated to Islam do not benefit from an appropriate and legitimate space for their expression, in particular if they try to unpack and understand the complexity (economic, social and political) of contemporary society issues<sup>40</sup>. Some Muslim scholars (including women) affirm that their statements are often discredited due to their religious belongings, and presented as individual or collective claims only based on their supposed religious interests and not as complex and legitimate reasoning. “It is difficult to be considered a valid intellectual, we are never detached from this belonging”<sup>41</sup>, stated a lawyer, and this discrimination is perceived as a form of micro-aggression<sup>42</sup> (Solorzano, 1998) exerted against scholars.

On the political scene, it occurs recurrently that some parties or movements and the representatives of these groups, make use of discriminatory remarks towards Muslims during their electoral campaigns or regular political activities and that Muslim politicians are intercepted – if not overtly addressed – by these remarks. This happens in Flanders in particular, where already in 1988 the Vlaams Blok (today Vlaams Belang), the Flemish separatist extreme-right party, used anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic discourse in the municipal election campaigns (Manço, 2004). As Zemni puts it, “[a]s early as 1992, Islamophobic slogans were becoming quite normal in Flemish nationalist milieus. ‘*Turkseratten, roluwmaten*’ (Turkish rats, roll your mats) was regularly sung during far-right political meetings and rallies.” (Zemni, 2011: 30). This climate influences discriminating practices regularly occurring in political debates and affects political representatives of Muslim and migrant backgrounds, regardless of their personal life history or religious positioning, and unrelatedly to their political role or to the specific discussions in which they intervene. In September 2016, to cite an example, the Flemish socialist deputy Meryame Kitir was object of discriminating comments by the liberal Luk Van Biesen, who signaled his disagreement with regard to the deputy’s arguments on a

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<sup>39</sup> See <http://www.verviers.be/administration-communale/services-communaux/radicalisme-safer>, accessed 10 March 2016.

<sup>40</sup> These was the opinion, in particular, of a woman, 50 years old, university assistant professor; a man, 47 years old, trainer and researcher at research institute; a man, 35 years old, politician and activist (Mescoli, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> Woman, 47 years old, lawyer at Interfederal Centre. The names of some Muslim scholars publicly discredited due to their religion have been pronounced during this interview but they are not reported here for confidentiality reasons (Mescoli, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Man, 47 years old, trainer and researcher at research institute (Mescoli, 2016).



specific issue of social security by pronouncing racist and unfounded remarks<sup>43</sup>. This discrediting occurring in the very same political arenas fosters and legitimates similar attitudes within the general population that frequently formulate similar racist attacks through the media. Victims of these attacks are, for example, Ahmed Laaouej, Deputy of the Socialist Party, Vice-President of the Socialist Party of Brussels and Municipal Councilor in Koekelberg; or Rachid Madrane, Minister of Youth Aid, Houses of Justice, Sports and Promotion of Brussels to the Federation Wallonia-Brussels; and Zakia Khattabi, co-president of the *Ecolo* party<sup>44</sup>. While we take into account the fact that the foreign origin – of the individual concerned or of his or her family – can play a role in determining similar acts of discrimination, we cannot exclude that the religious theme contribute to trigger them. This is more evident in one of the episodes regarding Zakia Khattabi, for example, who was also concerned by the request of expressing her opinion after the Paris attacks occurred in 2015<sup>45</sup>. This shows that the consideration of Muslims as “responding in uniform fashion to the call of their monolithic faith” (Zemni, 2011: 39) also determines the need for political representatives arbitrarily associated to this religious belonging to position themselves vis-à-vis some facts that do not necessarily have to question their opinion as Muslims. Zemni writes that Muslims – and this also concerns people associated to Muslim belonging – “[...] are put on the defensive as they are defined in a public debate in which they are only marginally participating. Muslims have been represented as a distinct and homogeneous community that can be separated from a broader public” (Zemni, 2011: 41).

This process impacts the role of Muslim political and intellectual representatives in public debates. A “process of ethnicification of the Muslim identity” (Fassin and Fassin 2006) emerges, meaning that otherness may also be defined “according to an assigned Muslim identity” and this occurs also despite the fact that “the claims of Muslims do not necessarily concern common political stances” (Zibouh, 2013: 19). Such process also influences the will to identify, categorize and describe standardized political attitudes, ranging from the so-called “Muslim vote” to the “special character of the political representation of Muslim MPs in the Brussels Region” (Zibouh, 2013: 18). This would imply that “a Muslim elector would vote for a Muslim candidate or that a group of Muslims would urge people to vote for a particular Muslim or non-Muslim candidate” (Zibouh, 2013: 20) as effect of a supposed social determinism coupled with the religious imprint.

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<sup>43</sup> See [http://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20160916\\_00881223/incident-luk-van-biesen-vs-meryame-kitir-les-quatre-facettes-d-un-racisme-ordinaire](http://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20160916_00881223/incident-luk-van-biesen-vs-meryame-kitir-les-quatre-facettes-d-un-racisme-ordinaire), accessed on 14 March 2017.

<sup>44</sup> See <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/politique-belge/integre-toi-le-basane-rentre-chez-toi-les-elus-aussi-sont-les-cibles-du-racisme-569e71e73570b38a583cc295>, accessed on 14 March 2017.

<sup>45</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1043664/article/actualite/belgique/politique/2015-11-15/zakia-khattabi-tres-emue-ce-n-est-pas-ca-que-mes-parents-m-ont-transmis->, accessed on 14 March 2017.

This narrative does not prevent Muslim intellectual and political representatives to occupy these roles within the local society, as some figures demonstrates<sup>46</sup>. Nevertheless, the price to pay can be high, both in terms of discrimination undergone and of social pressure experienced to reduce the visibility of their faith (whatever it may consists of and however they may live and express it). We will address this last point as narrative impacting everyday life; indeed we also assume that social pressure may influence, among other factors, the positioning of Muslims – or of people with a Muslim background – in the public domain. Colombo writes:

“An analysis of the evolution of Muslim political participation in Europe shows that Islamic parties have largely failed, while politicians with Muslim backgrounds who join parties with no Islamic identity have obtained good results. This means that Muslims with a strong religious identity are still seen as a world apart in Europe [...]” (Colombo, 2013: 143)



Following this reasoning, “Muslims who either have a secular identity or who live their faith as a personal belief” (Colombo, 2013: 143) have better chances, in spite of the racist attacks that they are still victims of, to pursue their public career. This is confirmed by the even more violent discriminations faced by Brussels parliamentarian Mahinur Özdemir during her whole political career for taking the oath and participating in the Brussels Parliament whilst wearing a headscarf<sup>47</sup>. In 2015, the francophone Belgian political party *Centre Démocrat Humaniste*, which Özdemir is representative in Schaerbeek and Brussels, finally announced its decision to expel her on the grounds of her alleged position on the Armenian genocide (Easat-Daas, 2016: 57).

## b) Mass-media domain

### Brussels is turning into a Muslim city

The diffusion of statistical projections addressing the demographic trends of the city of Brussels and their conversion into alarming perspectives that denounce the potential future religious shift of the city occur particularly through media. Several journal articles are devoted to this issue, in particular from 2008, when the “Religious barometer” of the Sonocom qualitative surveys unit counted

<sup>46</sup> The number of Muslim MPs in the Parliament of the Brussels Regional Coordination (*Bruxelles Coordination régionale*, BCR) rose from 0% in 1989 to 22.5% in 2009 (Zibouh, 2013: 23).

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.7sur7.be/7s7/fr/1502/Belgique/article/detail/900102/2009/06/22/Une-parlementaire-voilee-suscite-la-polemique.dhtml>.

Muslims in Brussels to one third of the population<sup>48</sup>. Other articles appeared later, in 2010 for example<sup>49</sup>, following a conference organized at the Free University of Brussels (ULB) by Chemsî Cheref-Khan of the association *La pensée et les hommes* entitled “A Muslim majority in Brussels in 2030: how to prepare ourselves to better ‘live together’”<sup>50</sup> and echoing a dossier published by *Le Vif L’express* on 16 April 2010. Starting from the assumption of a future “demographic explosion” of Brussels inhabitants, the aim of the conference and related publications was to study the religious and ethnic characteristics of this increasing population as well as to expose how to deal with the social cohesion issues emerging from inter-cultural and inter-religious cohabitations. These discourses act as narratives of hatred in which they discriminate Muslims – in the sense that they shape and make a category emerge out of a collectivity by



relying on cultural elements that are arbitrarily chosen and identified with this differentiating purpose – as constituting a separate segment of Brussels population and not an integral part of it, and a segment to be afraid of. In April 2011 the Francophone daily *Le Soir* devoted one episode of its series “The 7 capital clichés of Brussels” to this issue with the aim to downplay existing fears, but indeed it confirmed them, as revealed by a following poll in which 77% of the respondents validated the idea that Brussels was turning into a Muslim city (Fadil et al., 2011a: 222)<sup>51</sup>.

The attempts of some scholars to counter this narrative through unpacking statistics and labels and revealing their bias (see Torrekens, 2012; Hertogen, 2012), while serving to some extent the analytical purposes aimed at showing the greater complexity of a simplified situation, are not totally effective since they eventually re-adjust and mitigate estimations. In doing so, they seem to answer to the need of some other segments of Brussels population to be reassured with regard to the maintaining of a certain social, cultural and religious hierarchical organization of the city, more than to affirm the entitlement of all its citizens to an equal consideration of their legitimate place within

<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/la-belgique-terre-religieuse-51b89940e4b0de6db9b1d101> and <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2008/03/21/01003-20080321ARTFIG00068-l-islam-premiere-religiona-bruxelles-dans-vingt-ans.php>, accessed 21 February 2017.

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.lalibre.be/regions/bruxelles/une-majorite-musulmane-en-2030-51b8e36be4b0de6db9c500a3>, accessed 21 February 2017.

<sup>50</sup> My translation of the French title: *Une majorité musulmane à Bruxelles en 2030: comment nous préparer à mieux « vivre ensemble »*. See <http://archives.lesoir.be/bruxelles-musulmane-en-2030-t-20101113-014LP2.html>, [http://www.npdata.be/Data/Godsdiens/Le-Soir/SOIR\\_20101113\\_BRUX\\_UNE\\_12.pdf](http://www.npdata.be/Data/Godsdiens/Le-Soir/SOIR_20101113_BRUX_UNE_12.pdf) and <http://www.lalibre.be/regions/bruxelles/une-majorite-musulmane-en-2030-51b8e36be4b0de6db9c500a3>, accessed on 21 February 2017.

<sup>51</sup> See <http://archives.lesoir.be/bruxelles-ville-musulmane-t-20110411-01CGR6.html>.

it – with their social, cultural and religious affiliations, whatever they may be – at present as well as in future. Torrekens (2012) finally introduces a rapid overview of this issue by presenting the perceptions of her Muslim interlocutors, people who are still associated to cultural enclaves, or to “minority centralities” (in French *centralités minoritaires*). These physical and moral sites are interconnected with the local urban symbolism (Raulin, 2000) mostly through commercial functions that are folklorized by non-Muslim population (Torrekens, 2012). Indeed these perceptions witness the fact that the definition of the city collective identity does not include Muslims as citizens in full, and this constitutes a structural problem linked to an unequal interplay of forces which is perpetuated through media (and political) discourse. Torrekens points out on the one hand the difficulty of Muslim interlocutors to give voice to their claims of representativity, and on the other hands she invites Brussels (non-Muslim) population to accept “that Islam is also Belgian and that Belgium is also Muslim and to help the emergence of a Muslim elite – veiled or not veiled – in favourable economic positions and in responsibility roles in conformity to its level of competences and to diplomas” (Torrekens, 2012). Besides this, what is missing here is a clear statement of the legitimacy of a redefinition of the city priorities with regard to its citizens’ diversified socio-cultural needs. The idea of a Muslim majority in Brussels is denounced to be a “contemporary political mythology [...] articulated on the basis of the fear of the threat of an imminent invasion of new barbarians, putting at risk that which is a cultural model and even a model of civilization for certain people” (Torrekens, 2012). Indeed, the denunciation should be of a still present and widespread ethnocentric vision of cultural and religious morals which apparently has not been sufficiently questioned in order to open to the legitimate articulation of different perspectives. Working on dismantling this vision would seek a different posture to face the narrative described here, which would sound like: “Brussels is turning into a Muslim city, and so what?” Without intending to neglect the difficulties that are engendered by the dynamic redefinition of cities cultural priorities and interplay of forces, the focus should be on the legitimacy that this may happen. In spite of the numerous and strict constraints put to people mobility, individuals and groups did move – and still do it –, and they historically associated to geographical territories – among which Belgium – that redefine their socio-cultural characteristics thanks to all its inhabitants’ contributions. These redefinitions are legitimate in which they are not caused by violent and colonialist occupations, while they result from people mobility, which is still a fundamental part of human history.

#### A process of radicalization of Muslims is underway in Belgium

This statement is here considered as a narrative of hatred in which it often presupposes and relies on a latent association between Islam and terrorism diffused in public opinion, as well as on the belief that slipping from one to the other is indeed recurrent and easy. Muslims could potentially easily be brought, through religious discourse<sup>52</sup>, to infringe local laws. Such message conveyed by media may

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<sup>52</sup> This discourse would shape through fundamentalist trends which would develop in Belgium and have relative success because of organizational capabilities (Maréchal, 2008a: 66). They would have

also be supported by the re-appropriation and re-elaboration of research results. For example, the results of a recent survey conducted by the European Institute for Peace (EIP)<sup>53</sup> to challenge unfounded claims and misperceptions of the municipality of Molenbeek, were re-adjusted to entitle an article published on 7 March 2017 on *Le Soir* as follows: “In Molenbeek, radicalization is not a taboo”<sup>54</sup>. In fact, the survey consisted of inquiring the opinion of the inhabitants of this municipality on radicalization, thus making this issue an object of discourse, not being then a taboo. Indeed, the formulation used in the title of the article may be interpreted as if radicalization is something definitely present in the city, while the study, even if ambiguous with regard to some of its statements, did not focus on attesting this. Similar outcomes resulted from the dissemination of the main findings of the study “*Noir Jaune Blues*” (Black Yellow Blues) conducted by *Le Soir* and *RTBF* with the research institute *Survey & Action* and the foundation *Ceci n’est pas une crise* in 2017. Besides generally reporting the xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes of Belgian people with a non-EU migrant background<sup>55</sup>, media accounted for alarming attitudes of Muslims people involved in the research<sup>56</sup>. In fact, even if the majority of them declare living in ways which are similar to non-Muslim people, a third of them affirm that “they do not like Western habits” and 29% of them consider “Islamic laws higher than Belgian laws”<sup>57</sup>. The decontextualized presentation and mediatization of these figures – whose elaboration may also be questioned methodologically, since questions diverged in relation to the actor interviewed, and only in the case of Muslims they concerned the link between their belief and Belgian society in terms of norms and values – serve the reproduction of such narrative of hatred, as it emerges, for example, in the readers’ comments to the concerned article.

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gradually taken form starting from pietistic revival of Islam spread from the 1970s which would have progressively acquired a socio-political scope through the activities of Muslim Brotherhood local networks (Maréchal 2008a: 67-68). Salafism and neo-Salafism would have entered this process more recently, during the 1990s (Maréchal and Al-Asri, 2012: 201) and at the beginning of the 2000, when some young Muslims came back to Belgium after studying at Medina University (or in Jordany, Maréchal, 2008a: 73). The CIC (*Centre Islamique et culturel de Bruxelles – Mosquée du Cinquanteenaire*) would have a crucial role in promoting radical discourse under the influence of Saudi Arabia (see <http://www.levif.be/actualite/belgique/menaces-sur-l-islam-institutionnel-de-belgique/article-normal-450069.html>, accessed 23 March 2017).

<sup>53</sup> See <http://www.eip.org/en/news-events/what-does-molenbeek-think-%E2%80%93-new-eip-survey-reveals-drivers-violent-extremism> and <http://eip.org/en/research/brussels>, accessed on 22 March 2017.

<sup>54</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1437124/article/actualite/regions/bruxelles/2017-02-10/molenbeek-radicalisation-n-est-pas-un-tabou>, accessed 20 April 2017.

<sup>55</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1411012/article/actualite/belgique/2017-01-08/noir-jaune-blues-l-enquete-qui-demonstre-l-islamophobie-ambiante>, accessed 22 March 2017.

<sup>56</sup> According to the press, 400 Muslim people have been interviewed within the framework of this study.

<sup>57</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1411024/article/actualite/belgique/2017-01-08/noir-jaune-blues-lois-l-islam-superieures-aux-lois-belges-pour-29-des-musulmans>, accessed 22 March 2017.



Some cities are particularly in the spotlight concerning the supposed radicalization of their Muslim inhabitants, which would be attested by some recurrent factors: the presence of people who left to fight in countries where extremist groups are active – Iraq and Syria notably, following a “fourth wave of jihadi terrorism” (Coolsaet, 2016, who recalls Marc Sageman, 2008<sup>58</sup>) – and then returned to Belgium<sup>59</sup>; the appearance of discourses judged as extremist, spread for example through imams in certain mosques or by associations and/or political organizations; the manifestation of a supposed increased tightness within local Muslim community with regard to religious practices, claims and intergroup relationships. Among these cities are Brussels (in particular the municipality of Molenbeek), the Flemish municipalities of Vilvoorde and Maaseik, certain neighbourhoods of Anvers (in Flanders) and Liège (in Wallonia), and the Walloon city of Verviers. These sites are often described as “radicalisation hubs” (*foyers de radicalisation*), shaping an imaginary around them as dens where Muslims would gradually stiffen their faith and practice and couple them with violent political discourse and action. Raid and arrests regularly carried out by Belgian police in these areas “contribute to the climate of fear of Belgian Muslims” (Easat-Daas, 2016: 55). This also happens because of statements such as that of the French journalist and writer Eric Zemmour, inciting at bombing Molenbeek to get rid of terrorism<sup>60</sup>.

Indeed, the imaginary and fears about violent militant Muslim groups in Belgium is not a matter exclusively linked to recent events, it is in fact anchored in the past. Already in 1986, the participation of a significant number of Muslims to the pro-Libya demonstration in Brussels in response to the US bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi recalled above, attracted media attention, particularly in the Francophone part of Belgium through the RTBF broadcasting service. This event was rapidly described as “a pro-fundamentalist demonstration, [and it] warned against the presence of militant groups in the capital” by nourishing a moral panic (Fadil et al., 2014: 226).

In 1989, these perceptions emerge for example when the director of the ICC was found dead after taking a critical position against the Iranian fatwa on Salman Rushdie and the “Satanic verses” (1988). A number of studies scientifically examine this supposed threat by assuming non-questioned indicators and criteria, such as the presence of explicit anti-Israeli rhetoric (Fadil et al., 2014: 250).

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<sup>58</sup> According to the American scholar and former CIA case officer Sageman, this wave consists of “religious terrorism built on the belief that the world has decayed into a morass of greed and moral depravity [...]. A revivalist faction blames Western influence for corrupting the descendants of a virtuous religious community, which originally lived in proximity to its prophet or God. Re-create this original community and paradise will come.” (Sageman, 2008: 33). Refer to Coolsaet (2016) for a rapid overview of the three previous waves.

<sup>59</sup> This may concern primarily young people with migrant background from North-African or Arab countries; besides them, Chechen migrants are also frequently suspected to be involved in this process. Media account for more than 400 Belgians and up to 470 (Coolsaet 2016: 9) who left to fight in Syria (see for example [http://www.vlaanderen.be/int/sites/iv.devlh.vlaanderen.be.int/files/documenten/actieplan\\_radicalisering\\_eng.pdf](http://www.vlaanderen.be/int/sites/iv.devlh.vlaanderen.be.int/files/documenten/actieplan_radicalisering_eng.pdf); other references in Coolsaet 2016: 9).

<sup>60</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1045840/article/actualite/france/2015-11-17/eric-zemmour-france-devrait-bombarder-molenbeek-video>, accessed 23 March 2017.

Among these studies, that by Koutroubas et al. (2009) takes into account some associations which may be considered radical; while Maréchal (2008b) examines the shapes taken by what she defines as fundamentalist networks in Belgium. Depicting the link between the revitalization of Islam and of a supposed original interpretation of its sacred texts, these studies, in spite of distinguishing intellectual exercise and political militancy<sup>61</sup>, may nourish the assumptions on Muslims mentioned at the beginning of this section and legitimate the discourse on radicalization.

You got him, boys! so proud of you. Together we can fight terrorism. @FedPol\_pers  
FedPol\_pers @PolFed\_presse

Vertaling weergeven



More recently, in particular after the events that occurred in March 2016 in Brussels, this discourse has been reiterated through mediatizing the words of political representatives. This is the case for the statements of Jan Jambon (affiliated to the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Deputy prime minister and minister of Security and Home Affairs), declaring on a Flemish journal that a significant part of Muslim community “danced” after these events and protested against the imprisonment of Salah Abdelslam<sup>62</sup>, accused of

being involved in Paris attacks in 2015. The politician went forward and spoke of a supposed latent, diffuse and deep radicalization of Muslims as “a cancer” of Belgian society to be dealt with. Together with these statements, discourses around the state security services successes in fighting terrorism are rhetorically reiterated, as in the tweet shown here. As recalled concerning anti-radicalization policies, Fadil analyses this and other similar statements, as means of the state to reaffirm its sovereignty – meaning the law, the authority of the state and the regulation of population – and she shows how the very same creation of the “Muslim question/problem” (Norton 2013; Haijrat and Mohammed, 2013; Fernando, 2014) serves this aim (Fadil, 2016).

### Islam threatens Belgian traditions

The description of a possible “Islamisation” of western societies – ranging from Europe in more general terms to Belgium and Brussels in more specific terms – is based on alerting about the supposed exponential increase of Muslims’ presence but also and above all about the feared changes of political, economic and social rules which would be adapted to Muslims’ needs and claims. This narrative is reinforced through denouncing the incompatibility of Muslim traditions with the Belgian

<sup>61</sup> This recalls the double meaning of *djihad*, as interpretative effort and as political and historical struggle.

<sup>62</sup> This declaration was also mediatized on French speaking journal, see <http://www.lesoir.be/1183393/article/actualite/belgique/2016-04-16/pour-jan-jambon-beaucoup-musulmans-ont-danse-apres-attentats>.

national – and original – ones and the threat that these lasts could be eradicated by such described process. As we already mentioned it in previous sections of this report, this kind of discourses can inform integration policies and programs which, even if they do not directly concern Islam, seem to promote acculturation and assimilation into the local context more than a dynamic and respectful – with regard to diversities – incorporation into it. The role played by rising non-Muslim secularism in these discourses is crucial, as Zemni puts it:

“Especially in Flanders, a growing public discourse describing Judaeo-Christian civilisation as the only possible cradle of modern secularism has gained momentum, as several publicly avowed atheists or agnostics now describe themselves as Christians by culture or ascribe their secularity to Christianity. In this amalgam of discourses, based on a very selective re-reading of history, Islam is being pitted as a major threat to this specifically Judaeo-Christian secular Europe. [...] Almost daily warnings of the imminent Islamisation of Europe and its transformation into Eurabia offer an indication of a growing obsession with Islam.” (Zemni, 2011: 40).

The association PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West, that was founded in Germany and has gained some support in Belgium) regularly protests against the alleged “Islamification” of Europe (Easat-Daas 2016: 56).

This general climate is illustrated by some recent facts. In August 2014 a firm producing the renowned “syrup of Liège” decided, for commercial reasons, to label this product as “halal”, thus going through a legal certification process established by the Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Executive of Muslims in Belgium. The media circulated coverage that a traditional product of Liège has become “halal”, thus initiating Islamophobic protests. Among them, that of a politician, who decided to symbolically take back the syrup he had bought for the firm in name of the preserving a civilization which is being brought to fade<sup>63</sup>.

Muslim people are unexpectedly involved in some current discussions which they are not linked to in order to accuse them of threatening local traditions – that they are not entitled to share in any terms. To give another example, in 2012 a debate arose about an artistic fake Christmas tree that was put in the main square in Brussels instead of the traditional one. This choice was associated to a presumed Islamic influence<sup>64</sup>. The same accusations followed the decision of the owner of the historical fast food restaurants *Tout est bon dans le cochon* (which means that each part of pork is good to eat) to leave the 2014 October fair held in Liège after repeated aggressions and determined him to publicly declare that Muslims were in no way involved in this fact<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> See <http://www.lameuse.be/1351896/article/2015-08-11/sirop-de-liege-halal-scandalise-l-ancien-chef-de-file-mr-vervietois-ramene-son-p>, accessed on 14 March 2017.

<sup>64</sup> See [http://www.rtbf.be/info/regions/detail\\_la-version-2012-du-sapin-de-noel-de-la-grand-place-cree-la-polemique?id=7872806](http://www.rtbf.be/info/regions/detail_la-version-2012-du-sapin-de-noel-de-la-grand-place-cree-la-polemique?id=7872806), accessed 14 March 2017.

<sup>65</sup> See <http://www.lesoir.be/1017685/article/soirmag/actu-soirmag/2015-10-15/l-enseigne-tout-est-bon-dans-cochon-doit-quitter-foire-liege>, accessed on 14 March 2017.



*c) Everyday life domain*

Veiling is incompatible with Western values and local rules<sup>66</sup>

The debate on headscarf, first initiated in France, spread in Belgium at least from 1989 (Fadil et al., 2014: 226). Besides resulting in the adoption of the anti-burqa law, already recalled above, this debate, still present today at different levels of the public and political discourse, concretely impacts Muslim women's everyday experiences. We see "a sense of discomfort over the headscarf" which is "[...] perceived [...] as a sign of a return to tradition or a rejection of Western norms and values" (Fadil et al., 2014: 226). This perspective influences diverse opinions, practices and norms against veiling which have discriminating effect on women. The processes of racialization that are at the heart of Islamophobia are characterized by a profoundly gendered dimension (Fadil et al., 2014: 226; Bracke 2007; Mescoli 2016). This occurs within the framework of more general statements linking the supposed modernity of a given culture to (and thus assessing it through) the "women's status" that such culture promotes and its compliance to Western values, mainly shaped on the bases of the ideally universal human rights discourse<sup>67</sup>. In this perspective, "'women's emancipation' is used as a boundary marker of Western civilization" (Fadil et al., 2014: 226) and this has long determined, among other, rescue narratives and politics targeting Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2002) and depicting Islam as "women-unfriendly" (Fadil et al., 2014: 226). Besides implementing in a broader geographical context where North-South (or West-East) geopolitical hierarchies play a crucial role, these processes are also active in the European context, where these hierarchies shape with regard to intergroup relationships linked to migration. More precisely, as Fadil et al. put it "the question of women's oppression, neutrality, or the need for an 'enlightened' or 'modern' Islam" (2014: 242) can act in defence of the opposition to the wearing of the veil. Anti-veiling sentiments thus appear as constituting a relevant and diffuse form of the anti-immigrant prejudice (Saroglou et al., 2009) which takes women as privileged object of its realization and focus on veil to legitimate its action. In its recent report on discrimination against Muslims in Europe, Amnesty International (2012) highlights the great range of discrimination experienced by veiled Muslim women in Belgium.

The ENAR report devoted to the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim women (Mescoli, 2016) shows through fieldwork evidence how this discrimination concretely acts. Muslim women face an institutional context that not only does not always respond to their claims and needs, but that is also

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<sup>66</sup> This narrative confirms a "growing Islamophobic demonization and intense fixation on Muslim women's dress in Belgium" (Easat-Daas, 2016: 57) that also targets long skirts, as demonstrated by recent facts. For example, the Catholic school in Mechelen has banned students from wearing long skirts to school, justifying this by the will of removing faith symbols from schools. This provision was unfairly targeted towards young Muslim schoolgirls and it also occurred (though temporarily) in Brussels (Easat-Daas, 2016: 57).

<sup>67</sup> See for example Anthias and Yuval Davis, 1989; Kandiyoti, 1991.

often perceived as the direct responsible for certain forms of structural discrimination and for their perpetuation in private and public context. This is particularly evident concerning veiling. In the work domain, the interdiction of wearing Islamic headscarf in the public sector<sup>68</sup> is perceived as putting structural limits to the employment possibilities of Muslim women, and also as providing with institutional legitimation those employers who forbid veiling in the private sector. Even if such practice remains arbitrary, there is an inclination to re-appropriate the notion of public neutrality and to transfer it to other contexts. Moreover, recent decisions of the Court of Justice of the European Union allowed employers in the private sector to prevent their employees from wearing visible signs of their political, philosophical or religious convictions<sup>69</sup>. This fact is seen as legitimating the continuation of discriminating practices toward Muslim women at work<sup>70</sup>.

The consequences of this situation on women arise in different phases of their life history from their studies to the implementation of their professional career. The prohibition of wearing Islamic headscarf within certain schooling institutions already alerts women about what they are most probably going to experience throughout their life. This has been proved to influence curricula and professional choices acting as a sort of lever for auto-exclusion (also see Ben Mohamed, 2004 on this issue) from some professional paths<sup>71</sup>. Auto-exclusion results from a concrete evaluation of employment opportunities made by women by taking into account the local dynamics around veiling. The domestication (Rogers, 2005) of women with regard to their professional trajectories is here coupled with structural constraints put to the wearing of the veil, and it can orientate Muslim women firstly to professions where they can concretely see the opportunity to be hired besides their headscarf<sup>72</sup>. Moreover, discrimination acts during job interviews with potential employers, where

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<sup>68</sup> This norm concerning institutions and public services providers is linked to the principle of neutrality of the state aimed at recognizing equal rights among the institutionally recognized worships at thus at preventing discrimination. Indeed, this principle has rapidly slipped into the semantic field of *laïcité* and has consequently caused a stronger opposition against veiling in different professional domains.

<sup>69</sup> See the Court of Justice of the European Union Cases C-157/15 Achbita and C-188/15 Bougnaoui (<https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2017-03/cp170030en.pdf>).

<sup>70</sup> The CCIB denounces it, as reported here: <http://www.lesoir.be/1460299/article/actualite/belgique/2017-03-14/voile-en-entreprise-un-laissez-passer-pour-discriminer>, accessed 17 March 2017.

<sup>71</sup> This recalls a further narrative of hatred that we will analyse later and that we describe as social pressure exerted on Muslim people.

<sup>72</sup> Employment agencies too are reported to act in this direction while directing veiled Muslim women toward certain jobs. Working as a teacher of Islamic religion is one among these professions, even if in some cases school directors forbid wearing the veil outside the Islamic religion class, fact which limits women's freedom of movement within the concerned institutions and their possibility to engage in broader pedagogical programs. As in others, also within this professional domain it is often needed that women undergo a juridical process before seeing their rights respected (Mescoli, 2016).

women are asked questions aimed at assessing their “level of Muslim-ness” (Mescoli, 2016<sup>73</sup>): Muslim religiosity and its concrete practice are evaluated to measure if they are compatible or not to what employers deem as a good functioning of their firm, service, or other. This level is tested through questions on women’s domestic intimacy formulated on the basis of stereotypical visions of gender relationships, such as: “does your husband beat you?”. Other questions concern individual behaviours, such as: “do you shake hands with men? Do you pray five times a day?”. Indeed, this assessment prevails over that of professional skills and it is particularly violent toward veiled women, since their religious belonging is made visible through it.

Besides these facts, this narrative of hatred causes not rare physical aggressions targeting women. Incidents reported by the Interfederal Centre (UNIA, 2015) include physical assaults against women wearing headscarves occurred in Brussels, Liège and Verviers. Besides this, the CCIB figures (2015) give an indication as 63.6% of around 50 Islamophobic hate crimes and offenses that the association identified between January 2012 and September 2015 concerned women. Brems et al. (2014) report that several women experienced an increase in aggressive reactions and associate the beginning of this process to the anti-burqa law and debate and its mediatization:

“[t]hey think that the negative image of Islam in general and of the face veil in particular that is projected in the media seems to give people permission to react in an aggressive manner. [...] Moreover, it appears that many people now refer to the ban in their interventions vis-à-vis women who wear the face veil, acting as a kind of vigilante police.” (Brems et al., 2014: 106).

In fact, some women report their experiences of aggression and discrimination on account of their wearing the face veil, such as “refusal of treatment of a veiled woman by hospital staff, refusal of vendors at a curio market to sell their goods to a veiled woman, and refusal by a school director to let a mother pick up her child from school when wearing her face veil” (Brems et al. p. 106). These experiences led some women stop going out by themselves, while others resorted to abandoning the face veil or limit its use. Analytically, we can approach this narrative from an intersectional perspective<sup>74</sup> that highlights “how the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities” (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242) than gender. What is at stake here is their religious belonging and the stereotypical and discriminating representations that it engenders, as well as their being object of more broader discourses that focus on women as a pretext to reiterate socio-cultural local and global hierarchies.

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<sup>73</sup> In the Forgotten Women report this expression has been improperly changed by reviewers into “level of Islamisation”. We here reintroduce the notion of “level of Muslim-ness” since we consider it more appropriate to describe the process at stake. In fact, women undergo an assessment of their own experience of faith as Muslims, that we define here as “Muslim-ness” (also following Toğuşlu, 2015), while the notion of Islamisation is discursively associated to other issues and processes.

<sup>74</sup> Literature on intersectionality applied to the study of issues related to Muslim women is recently developing (see for example Bilge, 2010; Buitelaar, 2006; Hamidi, 2015; for Belgium, among others: Brems, 2015; Djelloul, 2014).

Mosques do not belong in the local context: on the imperfect form of Muslims' citizenship.

Hate speech and crime against Muslims may also take the form of instigating attacks to mosques, and these attacks may also occur physically. Whether these acts may not be numerous, they are considered here in the process of identification of the main narratives of hatred against Muslims in



reason of the potential of violence – and of symbolic violence – that characterizes them and the associated discourses. UNIA reports that in 2014 some calls to burn mosques were launched via Facebook and Twitter and that a violent action was undertaken by some militants of Voorpost (a Flemish nationalist group) against a mosque in Zelzate<sup>75</sup>. Acts of vandalism took place in the Walloon municipality of Lodelinsart (2011), where a future mosque was tarred with Islamophobic slogans written in pork blood<sup>76</sup>.

Other mosques were victims of attacks in 2011, such as that of Marchienne-au-Pont (Wallonia)<sup>77</sup>; three other mosques in Genk (Flanders) were victims of vandalism in 2013<sup>78</sup>.

Conflicts around mosques also arise in other forms: individual and collective protests, administrative and institutional complaints – against the construction of new mosques or in more general terms against the use of these worship sites. Dassetto and Ralet (2010) analysed three case studies – among several other registered – of disputes generated by the establishment or the transformation of mosques that occurred respectively in Bastogne (Wallonia), in Neder-over Heembeek (Brussels-Capital Region) and in the neighbourhood of Borgerhout in Anvers (Flanders). Through the diverse chronologies and typologies of the facts, the authors – while they do not associate these events to Islamophobia – describe such disputes not as structural ones but as natural integral parts of processes toward the solution of intercultural conflicts. Minimizing the impact of such disputes in shaping local environment of hatred and their connection to discourses spread on a broader territory, Dassetto and Ralet affirm that: “[t]he establishment of a mosque [...] is likely to cause a reaction, in the same way as the construction of a supermarket.” (2010: 86). The authors add, pointing at the responsibility of Muslims within these conflicts: “[...] we can also see how Muslims do not always manage to assume responsibility for or to face the conflict that they have generated. In other words, the institutional progress of Islam, made possible by religious enthusiasm, is capable of, among other things,

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<sup>75</sup> <http://www.diversite.be/lislamophobie-fait-des-victimes-de-la-toile-vers-lespace-public>, accessed 15 December 2015.

<sup>76</sup> See [https://www.rtf.be/info/regions/detail\\_lodelinsart-une-future-mosquee-vandalisee?id=5973703](https://www.rtf.be/info/regions/detail_lodelinsart-une-future-mosquee-vandalisee?id=5973703), accessed 17 March 2017.

<sup>77</sup> See [http://www.lavenir.net/cnt/DMF20110727\\_00026996](http://www.lavenir.net/cnt/DMF20110727_00026996), accessed 17 March 2017.

<sup>78</sup> See <http://lepeuple.be/trois-mosquees-vandalisees-a-genk-loeuvre-de-desequilibres/12535>, accessed 17 March 2017.

mobilizing financial means, but seems at times to exceed the speed of the community's integration into its context." (Dassetto and Ralet, 2010: 86). The authors eventually admit that extremist groups intervene in these disputes with the explicit aim of increasing tension among local residents; only in some cases these groups would "carry real political weight" (Dassetto and Ralet, 2010: 87), while they do "continue to mark the terms of the debate, to set the tone" (Dassetto and Ralet, 2010: 87). The issue at stake for Dassetto and Ralet is that of identity, even if cultural (and religious) hierarchies at play in these disputes are not necessarily taken into consideration, privileging the interpretation of these facts as naïf rejection of the (Muslim) Other while defining collective (European and non-Muslim) selves: "It is also clear that beyond political interest actions, there is a genuine questioning of identity and European identity taking place among local populations. This question is conservatively formed – *Europa nostra* – in terms that are often full of enmity towards Islam or anything that perturbs this sense of identity." (Dassetto and Ralet, 2010: 87). Indeed it is clear that in spite of formal integration among the officially recognized worships in Belgium and in spite of "forms of 'citizenization' of Muslims", Islam itself is not yet "citizenize[d]" (Allievi, 2009: 89). This means that we still face imperfect forms of citizenship allowed to Muslims – in particular if they have a migration background – and this seems to legitimate the insurgence of narrative of hatred against their worship sites.

#### Islam as an easy target of derision: on the dehumanisation of Muslims through mocking narratives

Messages diffused on the Internet<sup>79</sup> and in the media in general which contain elements inciting discrimination, hatred or violence are predominant (UNIA, 2015: 31). Some of them are recognized as hate crimes or hate speeches as they overtly breach anti-discrimination law and are then punishable (up to a judicial process) if identified racist contents are not withdrawn. Besides these messages, less overt but equally violent narratives of hatred are diffused in the media through the use of mockery in different forms. These instruments of discrimination are more difficultly identified as such and very often they are not prosecuted by law in the name of the freedom of thought and of its implementation within media domain (press in particular). Well-known cases such as the publication of cartoons representing the prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-



Posten in 2005 and in the French journal Charlie Hebdo (several issues from 2006 to 2015) marks crucial points in this process giving legitimacy to further similar actions. At the same time, the protests and the violent acts which followed these publications constituted the occasions to reinforce the discourse about the presumed incompatibility of Muslims with supposedly unanimous European values.

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<sup>79</sup> Hate speech appears through different Internet channels, such as email chains, where Muslims are particularly addressed, as the Inter-Federal Centre shows it in a brochure on cyber-hate (UNIA, 2009: 14-15)

We can see some effects of this process also in Belgium, where these images were partially reproduced by some newspapers, as it occurred for the Jyllands-Posten cartoons in the Flemish *De Standaard*<sup>80</sup> and for the Charlie Hebdo front pages on the French-speaking *Le soir*<sup>81</sup>. Belgian cartoonists and journalists also took these opportunities to reaffirm freedom of press against censorship – based on religion, politics or other, and exerted through different kinds of attacks or through the journals' refusal to publish their works<sup>82</sup>. But besides this, one of them (Pierre Kroll) declared to question the need of realizing cartoons such as those when no current affairs justify them and when this leads to international tensions (Dassetto, 2011: 76)<sup>83</sup>. Kroll translated this thought into the representative image shown above, indeed still controversial, as potentially object of different interpretations. This is also the case of a cartoon by Cécile Bertrand published on *La Libre*, portraying a man who would represent the prophet Mohammad being pied in his face<sup>84</sup>; or of a cover page of the same journal representing him through a dot-to-dot game (2 February 2006<sup>85</sup>).



Other mocking narratives targeting Muslims were diffused in particular in Flanders, where some cartoons were published in 2015 at school re-entry using racist depictions of children. These images

<sup>80</sup> See for example [http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf15032006\\_061](http://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf15032006_061), accessed 20 March 2017.

<sup>81</sup> See for example <http://www.lesoir.be/751785/article/actualite/france/2015-01-07/unese-blematisques-charlie-hebdo>, accessed 20 March 2017.

<sup>82</sup> See <http://www.dhnet.be/actu/societe/decouvrez-les-caricatures-censurees-par-la-presse-belge-51b75079e4b0de6db978da69> and

<sup>83</sup> Also refer to <http://archives.lesoir.be/mahomet-l-affaire-s-emballer-t-20060202-004DAQ.html>, accessed 20 March 2017.

<sup>84</sup> <http://galeries.lalibre.be/album/dessins/caricaturistes/image096.jpg/>, accessed 20 March 2017.

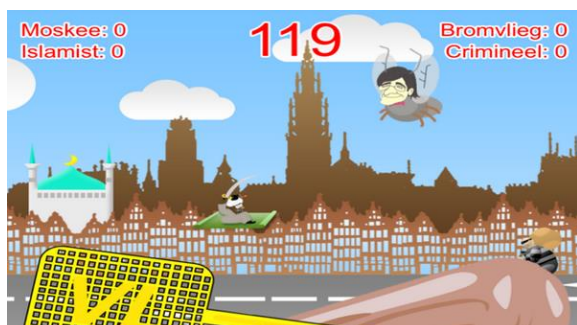
<sup>85</sup> Image retrieved here: <http://www.courrierinternational.com/breve/2006/02/03/peut-on-representer-mahomet>, accessed 20 March 2017.



contribute to feed a broader process of criminalisation of Muslim people<sup>86</sup>.



They show that also “Muslim youth are locked into a cycle of discrimination and criminalisation which is not only a major injustice in itself, but [...] [also] heightens already widespread perceptions of insecurity among the population at large.” (Fekete, 2004: 12). On this issue Zemni (2011) recalls the declarations of Paul Beliën – a far-right Catholic conservative journalist today advisor to Dutch politician Geert Wilders. In 2006, after a young schoolboy from Brussels, Joe van Holsbeek, was murdered in Brussels Central Station for his MP3 player, Beliën published in *De Standaard* (21 April 2006) an op-ed entitled “*Geef ons wapens*”, (Give us arms in English). In his op-ed, Beliën stated that: “Muslims are predators that have learned from childhood ... during the yearly feast of the sacrifice ... how to slaughter warm herd animals.” (Zemni 2011: 31). Zemni shows that this account is aimed at dehumanize Muslims through the animalization of their actions (Zemni, 2011: 38).



Again with reference to Flanders, we can mention another case of mocking narrative that is the videogame diffused by a politician of the Vlaams Belang party in Anvers just before the Belgian federal election in 2014. This video-game entitled “Minder, Minder, Minder” (“Less, Less, Less”) directly addressed the Muslim community in Belgium as composed of elements (mosques, islamists, criminals) to eliminate in

the country – and in Anvers in particular<sup>87</sup>. The ex-Prime Minister of Belgium Elio Di Rupo and other politicians would be in charge of this task.

<sup>86</sup> In the first cartoon, the child keeping a bomb in his hand tells having been to Syria during summer. See <http://www.kifkif.be/actua/open-forum-kinderrechtencoalitie-de-effecten-van-racisme-op-het-psychisch-welzijn-en-de-ontwik>, accessed 18 March 2017. No sanctions followed these publications.

<sup>87</sup> <http://www.vice.com/be/read/minder-minder-minder-the-game>, accessed 18 March 2017. UNIA registered a complaint about this videogame, but the procedure to try to make it sanctioned as press offence and through resorting to the *Cour d'assises* (criminal court) was considered too complicated and heavy to be carried out.

Islamic practices need to be secularized to be accepted in Western societies: on the social pressure exerted by non-Muslim environment on Muslims.

Differently from direct discrimination, indirect discrimination or discriminating harassment<sup>88</sup>, some acts or discourses addressed to Muslims and impacting their everyday life and the ways in which they may live their faith, are not identified by anti-discrimination state agencies nor often overtly denounced by Muslims themselves as being racist. Indeed, these acts or discourses shape a social pressure exerted on Muslims through different forms and functioning as narrative of hatred in which it implicitly questions – and eventually manage to reorient – a variety of Muslim practices, norms and values. We intend social pressure not as an alleged intra-communitarian control over one's habits as it is meant for example by Roy (2000; 2007) – even if we may suppose that different views on such practices, norms and values may lead to reciprocal contestations of one's own positioning among Muslims themselves. Social pressure is exerted here by a non-Muslim majority environment in which Islam and related habits are still perceived as deviating from the local norm. This perspective shapes on Goffman theorization of social stigma (1975)<sup>89</sup>, i.e. a process of blaming on the basis of assigned social identity and of “a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (1975: 13). Stigma theory consists of “[...] an ideology to explain [...] inferiority [of a person with a stigma] and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences” (Goffman, 1975: 14). This stereotyping or profiling process occurs with regard to normative expectations on conduct and character (Goffman, 1975: 67). The effects on socially stigmatized people include influence on shaping a “moral career” on the basis of a commitment to personal adjustments, meaning that “those with an inborn stigma [...] become socialized into their disadvantageous situation even while they are learning and incorporating the standards against which they fall short” (Goffman, 1975: 44-45). The incorporation of both the stigma and the normative rules of the majority – being this last a necessary condition for social life – has an impact on religious choices and practices and can then be described as social pressure influencing them. The incorporation of implicit or explicit norms and judgments determines the choice of making compromises with one's own faith – seen as “abnormal beliefs” (Goffman, 1975: 155) – so to preventively avoid discrimination. In that, social pressure also determines Muslims being placed under constant categorizing scrutiny.

To make concrete examples of this perspective, we can mention again the results of Torrekens and Adam's recent study about Belgian people with Moroccan and Turkish background (2015) accounting for the fact that the main grounds for discrimination of Muslims would be ethnicity and skin colour more than religion itself. Without questioning these results, it is interesting to analyse the informants' reactions to them. In fact, several among these people interpreted these results by

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<sup>88</sup> See [https://www.belgium.be/fr/justice/victime/plaintes\\_et\\_declarations/discrimination](https://www.belgium.be/fr/justice/victime/plaintes_et_declarations/discrimination) and <http://unia.be/fr/criteres-de-discrimination/discrimination-quelques-precision> for a definition of these three forms of discrimination by state bodies, accessed 20 March 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Within possible forms of social stigma, Goffman defines that linked to race, nation and religion as “tribal stigma” (1975: 13).



stating that whether a Muslim is well integrated in the job market and their religion is not visibly shown and brought on the workplace (Torrekens and Adam, 2015: 206), he does not undergo religious discrimination. They also affirm that several Muslims make individual choices concerning their faith in order to adapt to the secularisation process ongoing in Belgium and thus deliberately limit their religious practice to their private life (Torrekens and Adam, 2015: 206). According to these opinions, what is defined as European Islam (Grillo, 2004), i.e. a perspective on Islam oriented by local processes of secularization – that we mean as a phenomenon of gradual decrease of the importance of the sacred within social life and individual subjectivity (Fabiatti, 2010) – and individualization and privatization of religious practices (Fadil, 2011) may result from the will of being secured from discrimination. The variety of ways of being Muslim (Cesari, 2004) will then be partially influenced by this fact. We do not mean that individual choices concerning religious practices, whenever they bring Muslims to a mainly or exclusively private performing of their faith are inevitably due to the social pressure to which they are exposed within a non-Muslim environment; indeed, we question the possibility that in such environment Muslims could make different choices, directed toward a more visible expression of their religious belonging.

This process is potentially at play in every sphere of Muslims' social life, and it becomes particularly evident within the work domain, where "the more strongly one's Muslim identity is proclaimed, the greater the exclusion from the labour market" (Brion and Manço, 1998)<sup>90</sup>. Religious practices associated to Islam, whether they may show up in this context, are object of different forms of discourses by a variety of actors – employers, colleagues, and eventually institutional bodies whose intervention may be solicited. Far from being some among the possible habits that a worker – and an individual – may adopt from the beginning or in the course of his or her life, wearing headscarf, eating halal, fasting during a month or making daily prayers emerge as controverted claims within these discourses. As a consequence, the legitimacy of these requests is tested, and the possibility to satisfy them – identifying in which terms this may happen – is evaluated; or, more often, the ways to eject them through law and other norms are examined. This is what happened at the main public transportation company of Brussels (STIB/MIVB), who in a pre-emptive response to potential challenges on the grounds of religious diversity of its drivers – the company ensures that at least half of them are of ethnic minority backgrounds, including an important proportion of Muslims (Lamghari, 2012: 35), thus the company has adopted a preventive position. In fact, it settled a neutrality policy forbidding the display of religious signs and the performance of religious practices at work (Lamghari 2012: 77).

In other cases, resorting to reasonable accommodations – in French "*aménagements raisonnables*"<sup>91</sup> or "*accomodements raisonnables*" when referring in particular to cultural and religious minorities;

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<sup>90</sup> Discrimination at hiring particularly impacts Muslims (Centre, 2012a), as it also shown by the results of research based on paired-testing method (see Ouali and Ceniccola, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> This anti-discrimination tool as it is defined in the anti-discrimination law (10 May 2007) originally concerns people with handicap, in line with the European directive 2000/78/CE. In its 2008 report, after studying the possibility of enlarging the meaning of this notion to apply to religious and cultural

*“redelijke aanpassingen”* in Flemish (Adam and Rea, 2010: 5) – can be a possible way to deal with Muslims’ religious practices. Often through the mediation of UNIA, the practices suddenly put under scrutiny are reoriented to forms that are acceptable within the local environment. Arrangements among parties may lead, for example, to define appropriated forms of veiling, i.e. without totally covering ears and chin, as it happened to a woman in a hospital (Mescoli, 2016)<sup>92</sup>. Another issue often dealt with through reasonable accommodations is the demand to allow Muslim employees to have a day off during Islamic religious festivities. When accepted, this demand was solved by allowing half a day of holiday (Adam and Rea, 2010: 55). Concerning praying, when it is allowed to Muslims, it is strictly regulated by norms: Muslims can pray during a fixed time (ten minutes a day in a Centre for Social Action – CPAS, for example) or during breaks; rarely a specific space is set to do it, thus incurring in conflicts and complaints from colleagues (Adam and Rea, 2010: 66-68). About food habits, meals containing pork which are served within professional contexts is replaced with other meats, although not necessarily coming from halal butcheries and thus ritually slaughtered (Adam & Rea 2010: 72).

Muslims’ demands – here in the work domain – are dealt with as requests that challenge the commonly accepted rules. In fact, UNIA defines reasonable accommodations as “the softening of a general norm so to let members of cultural minorities to live and work in conformity with their convictions” (Adam and Rea, 2010: 5). Such mediating processes have the merit of solving some conflictual situations, proving their contextual efficacy in situations where the positionings of the actors involved diverge. However, the need to resort to contextual compromises with one’s own practices – that are not supposed to harm or damage other people – and to ways of camouflaging them seems to corroborate the already mentioned reluctance of the state to engage in dealing with Muslims’ religious practices in more structured and inclusive terms. Whether these tools are used to deal with strictly individualised exception cases, they do not provide Muslims as religious minority with collective rights (Jonlet, 2010: 42)<sup>93</sup>.

This reluctance of the state legitimates other actors exerting social pressure on Muslims. Again concerning veil, in both private and public schools, seen that no clear laws exist concerning the wearing of the headscarf by students, and in spite of the recommendations expressed by UNIA, headmasters often abuse this unclear situation and act arbitrarily within their institution exerting such pressure. When they do not overtly write and apply internal rules prohibiting religious signs to

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issues (refer to <http://signes.diversite.be/note-signes-convictionels.pdf> for an account for this process), UNIA officially adopted the notion within the religious domain (Adam and Rea, 2010: 9).

<sup>92</sup> The issue of veiling in hospital is often problematic and involve the mobilisation of hygienic reasons to forbid this practice. We deem that the described reasonable accommodation forces the concerned woman to a new interpretation of veiling. While what happened in another hospital (the University Hospital in Ghent) may not have had this consequence. In fact, in this case the arrangement among parties consisted to include veil in nurses’ uniform whether requested, so that veil was provided by the hospital itself and has to be worn instead of one’s private one when getting changed before starting working.

<sup>93</sup> Concerning the legal aspects of this issue, refer to Bribosia et al., 2009.

students, they regularly convene Muslim girls to discourage them to wear the headscarf, thus blaming them for a non-existing guilt<sup>94</sup>.

In a previous research, we collected the story of another woman that may serve as further example of this narrative of hatred. She was divorced, she lived with her two children and she had a precarious economic situation which brought her to resort to the local public Centre for Social Action (CPAS) in Brussels. This centre delivers social services to people whose livelihoods are insufficient, and among these services it also provides job search assistance. Once the contact between a potential employer and the employee is positively settled, the CPAS also mediates and participates in the settlement of the contract. This woman recounts of having received nine work proposals from employees who found her competences adequate to the job position they offered. Nevertheless, each of them stated that wearing headscarf was incompatible with the work, and this prevented the woman from finally obtaining any of these jobs. It happened in spite of the fact that the CPAS, which would be the legal signatory of the contract, had not included in its rules the prohibition of showing religious signs and thus it should have protected her from receiving such requests from the potential employees. Indeed, the CPAS also reinforced this discriminatory approach to the woman, blaming her for her resistance to the employee's demand to take off her veil, accusing her of not willing to take care of her children, and also temporarily suspending her economic support.

Besides determining manifest discrimination acts, social pressure performs in more subtle ways. For example, previous research also showed that whether any convivial event is planned to occur during the month of Ramadan and its organization failed, Muslims are often blamed for this (they are supposed not to participate or to be offended by the temporal occurrence of the event)<sup>95</sup>. They are also object of social pressure with regard to other practices linked to religious recurrences, such as, in particular, the ritual slaughtering of muttons during the *Eid al-Adha* (the Feast of Sacrifice). A main actor conveying this process in Belgium is the Brussels section of the Global Action in the Interest of Animals (GAIA). This association overtly accuses Muslims for perpetuating violence on animals in the name of tradition and promotes a campaign against slaughtering without stunning<sup>96</sup>. In the framework of this campaign, GAIA diffused the results of a study conducted in collaboration with IPSOS in 2012<sup>97</sup> and it stated that 9 Belgian out of 10 (non-Muslims) were in favour of a law obliging studding in ritual slaughtering. This and other recurrent campaigns led, in 2015, to the prohibition to slaughter animals without prior stunning in the temporary slaughterhouses settled for *Eid al-Adha* in Flanders and Wallonia, while the practice remained allowed in Brussels. This decision reinforced the social pressure exerted on Muslims in the name of values and norms that they would infringe

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<sup>94</sup> This information came from informal conversations with some Muslims in Liège (Mescoli, 2016).

<sup>95</sup> Woman, 47 years old, lawyer at Interfederal Centre (Mescoli, 2016).

<sup>96</sup> See <http://www.gaia.be/fr/campagne/abattages-sans-etourdissement>, accessed 22 March 2017. In the image reported below, we can read: "In Belgium, 94% of muttons are slaughtered without studding. 40.000 will undergo this destiny during the Feast of Sacrifice".

<sup>97</sup> See [http://www.gaia.be/sites/default/files/campaigns/attachments/opinionpollresults\\_fr.pdf](http://www.gaia.be/sites/default/files/campaigns/attachments/opinionpollresults_fr.pdf), accessed 22 March 2017.



with their practices, and it had some consequences on the choices that Muslims made concerning the performance of them<sup>98</sup>.

Social pressure is also linked, especially in contemporary times and after the 2016 Brussels events, to the narratives of hatred denouncing a diffuse radicalization of Muslims. The director of UNIA declarations

confirm this, as he states, concerning some UNIA records of harassment at work: “If you have a Maghrebi name, you are supposed to be a potential terrorist. And you receive comments such as: ‘it’s your friends who did this...’”<sup>99</sup>. Besides this, Muslims are frequently requested to publicly dissociate from attacks claimed by supposed Islamist groups, and to do that individually or collectively (through associations, for example). Whenever this social pressure is not clearly identified and thus denounced for being harassment, it performs undisturbed on Muslims people during their everyday life.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Based on literature review and previous research studies, this report aimed at describing how an environment of hatred against Muslims shapes in Belgium in terms of recurrent narratives discriminating them. Identified on the basis of Sayyid’s typologies of Islamophobia, these narratives have been first organized in three main overlapping domains: the politics domain, the mass-media domain and the everyday life domains. Going beyond this repartition, we can try to assess the relative strength of these narratives without neglecting to account for the difficulties of this task.

In fact, these narratives inform the different forms – at times overlapping – of Islamophobia that shape as discourses, acts or policies. Moreover, they have not been collected and investigated through quantitative sampling, so to make it difficult to rank them in order of dominance. Nevertheless, we attempt a qualitative evaluation of their relative impact in terms of the significance and estimated coverage in contemporary times of the Islamophobic acts that they are related to. The ten narratives described in this report can then be ranked as follows:

1. Islamic practices need to be secularized to be accepted in Western societies
2. Veiling is incompatible with Western values and local rules
3. Islamic belonging (claimed or assigned) is a prior identity marker

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<sup>98</sup> We will address this issue as counter-narrative developed to face this aspect of social pressure.

<sup>99</sup> See <http://www.lalibre.be/actu/belgique/ils-portent-un-nom-maghrebin-ils-sont-presumes-terroristes-58ab3237cd703b98155887c3>, accessed 17 March 2017.

4. Islam threatens Belgian traditions
5. Brussels is turning into a Muslim city
6. A process of radicalization of Muslims is underway in Belgium
7. Islam is (and Muslims are) a problem for Western societies
8. Islam as an easy target of derision
9. Islamic religion legitimates extreme forms of women oppression
10. Mosques do not have their place in the local context

We deem that the social pressure exerted on Muslims to eventually (re)orient their practice of their faith has significant impact in de-legitimizing the role of Islam in Belgium society. The issue of veiling is one among the most addressed practices in this process. We also find that the use of a univocal reading lens to position Muslim representatives in the intellectual and political local sphere as mere bearer of religious interests is an equally strong instrument of discrimination and, moreover, it puts constraints to eventual changes. We then classified the narrative stating that “Islam threatens Belgian traditions” as highly significant since it is often the starting point – or the implicit message – on which further narratives rely on. This narrative goes together with denouncing the demographic increase of Muslims in Belgium. The narratives concerning recent violent facts associated to Islam, while being equally significant and partly rooted in past processes, come later because of their strong link to temporality, which may let us foresee possible changes. The last three narratives, despite their potential and effective violence, are listed below because of the estimated low quantitative incidence of the Islamophobic acts that they concern.

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