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## **Belgian Parliamentary Report on Radical Islam and Islamic Radicalism**

**Findings about the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism, and Recommendations**

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On 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2016, Brussels was hit by a double terrorist attempt in which 31 people lost their lives and more than 250 were injured. In the aftermath of this tragedy, the Belgian federal parliament put in place a parliamentary inquiry commission which delivered four intermediary reports. The first three reports published on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2016, 4<sup>th</sup> May 2017 and 15<sup>th</sup> June 2017 dealt with the various aspects of the management of the crisis on the day of the attacks, the assistance to victims during and after the crisis, and an analysis of the security architecture. The fourth intermediary report (205 pages) published on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2017 (\*) addressed a number of issues including

- Radical Islam and Islamic radicalism in Belgium (Chapter I)
- The case of the Grand Mosque of Brussels (Chapter II)

In the first chapter, the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism was investigated through various hearings of experts, witnesses and other actors. Here are the main findings that were made by the parliamentary inquiry commission.

### ***Muslim Brotherhood***

The Muslim Brotherhood is not a homogeneous and monolithic entity as there is no official structure of this movement. It is characterized by heterogeneous political undercurrents and ideologies in its midst but they are united around a common doctrinal corpus composed of a number of founding texts. Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood is also linked to a network of religious and cultural associations, such as the controversial *League of the Muslims of Belgium*, which plays a key role in the functioning of the Muslim community in the country. The worldview promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood aims at subjecting all the aspects of human life to religion: at the individual level (food, clothing, marriage, etc.), the societal level (human relations) and the political level (functioning of the State). Noteworthy is the fact that they do not accept questioning or criticism of their founding texts.

The philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood, which can be labeled “conservative”, may cause some problems if there is any attempt to impose it on a society that is not historically Muslim and not homogeneous, as is the case in Belgium. At this stage, the parliamentary commission of enquiry is not able to assess the magnitude of the propagation of their worldviews in Belgium. However, it seems, according to the commission, that many Muslims are open to their messages and find them sensible without being aware that they are linked to this movement. What is an undisputable fact is that a number of mosques in Belgium clearly adhere to the Muslim Brotherhood’s worldview and their ideology.

The question of possible closeness between the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and the use of violence is delicate and could not be settled by the parliamentary commission of inquiry after hearing several experts.

Some contend that they do not directly and openly incite violence. Others point at their logo: a Qu’ran, two swords and the first words of a surah saying “Prepare yourself” as a sign of violence. The full text of this surah is “*And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully repaid to you, and you will not be wronged*” (Surah Al Anfal-8-60, Al Qu’ran al-Kareem). The Muslim Brotherhood is also accused of regularly using a double-discourse: What they say publicly, in sermons and in conferences is sometimes far away from what they say internally.

Several witnesses heard by the parliamentary commission stressed that the promotion of the principles and values of the Muslim Brotherhood lead to individual and collective self-isolation, marginalization and ghettoization. By systematically criticizing the surrounding society, the Muslim Brotherhood contributes to the polarization of society instead of contributing to social inclusion and cohesion. This sort of polarization, which is now identified as a key component of the process leading to violent radicalization, is not new in the movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. The concepts of “takfir” (mécréant) declaring another Muslim *kâfir* as non-believer and “crusaders” were already used in their narratives in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

### ***Wahhabism***

The Wahhabi doctrine is well-established in Belgium. From a historical point of view, the public powers and the Muslim community and their leaders are responsible for this situation. Its rise is to be attributed to their failure to promote an Islam that is different from the Islamist radicalism.

Wahhabism proposes a radical view of Islam concerning the outside world and “the others” who do not share Wahhabi ideas and conceptions. Its radical nature is characterized by the refusal of any negotiations concerning the achievement of its objectives (everything or nothing) and by its perception of different attitudes as illegitimate. This vision of Islam, and the ensuing religious practice, can lead to self-exclusion from and negative perception of society.

The doctrinal corpus comprises of the use of “victimhood” discourse, the exploitation of a perceived humiliation and Manichean representations of society. A potential consequence of such rhetoric is that through repetition the adherents interiorize a different identity. The permanent confrontation between Wahhabism and the worldviews of “the others”, which are sometimes very divergent and sometimes fundamentally conflicting, is said to aggravate social divisions.

A number of issues which are presented as almost timeless by Wahhabism fail to pass the test of rigorous scholarly studies. There are often errors and/or deceptions about the historicity of some behaviors on sensitive issues such as the wearing of the veil. For example, some try nowadays to mislead people into thinking that the wearing of the veil has always been widespread and constant on “Muslim lands.” This teaching cannot withstand serious analysis as this practice has historically been fluctuating and presenting it as a return to a practice that was abandoned, or even corrupted, is fallacious. Additionally, some ideas spread by Wahhabism can be compared to viruses introduced in a software that can be reactivated at any time in the future. For example, in the “*Voix du Musulman*” (The Muslim’s Voice) which was distributed for free in the 1980s and 1990s, it said that homosexuals should be thrown down from the top of buildings, which Daesh did.

The experts heard by the parliamentary commission on the fight against radicalism and the terrorist threat in Belgium are unanimous in saying that Wahhabism has acquired a huge outreach power thanks to the almost unlimited financial means put at its disposal by political regimes promoting this doctrine, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, as well as by private philanthropists close to these states. This financial power has led to the control of religious practices in other countries. In Belgium, the Grand Mosque of Brussels is spreading Wahhabi teachings and is a case study in itself. Wahhabism has hereby become the vector of a dominant worldview that is omnipresent in communication supports, teaching and training materials. The collateral consequence of this quasi-monopoly is that the teachings of

alternative, reformist and progressive voices cannot be heard and cannot reach the minds and the souls of the Muslim audience. Concretely, a Muslim in Belgium who questions Islam and his relation to this religion only finds Wahhabi-Salafist answers on the market of Muslim worldviews.

### ***The Grand Mosque of Brussels***

The second chapter of the last intermediary parliamentary report questions the role of the Grand Mosque of Brussels. First of all, a historical contextualization.

In 1968 Belgium recognized the Islamic and Cultural Centre (ICC) as the representative platform of the Muslims and Islam of Belgium. One year later, the Belgian government signed a convention granting the ICC, then represented by the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the use of a building (that the Grand Mosque of Belgium [GMB] now occupies) for 99 years. In 1978, the new Islamic and Cultural Center of Belgium (CICB) was inaugurated, taking over the role of the ICC. The building complex now accommodates not only the Grand mosque but also a school, and a research and training centre on Islam and the Arabic language. For years the Grand Mosque of Brussels has been accused of propagating Wahhabism and Salafism in Belgium.

In its fourth intermediary report, the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission writes that it first heard Mr. Galaye N'Diaye, the GMB imam, and Mr. Jamel Saleh Momenah, director of the Cultural Islamic Centre of Brussels (CICB). As they did not know any of the Belgian national languages, they expressed themselves in English during the hearing. Both of them denied being Wahhabis or Salafists. The GMB imam noted that he was teaching Salaf Islam, the doctrine of the first three generations of Islam, but not Salafism, another current which led to the movements in Saudi Arabia... He claimed that he was preaching a moderate Islam.

Other actors and experts heard by the commission shared a different view about the activities of the GMB. There was a consensus among them to say that the Islam promoted by the GMB and the CICB is from the Wahhabi-Salafist current with a strong influence of the worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood. The doctrine of the Wahhabi-Salafists is literalist in its interpretation of the sacred texts, extremely normative culturally and exclusivist concerning other visions of Islam. Their conception of Islam refuses any compromise and claims total engagement of their adherents. It rejects "the others" who do not share it and creates a ghetto mentality. It rejects Sufism, the saints' worship, esoteric currents, the juridical schools and doctrines that have their own particularities in the interpretation of the Quran. The Wahhabi-Salafist project has political objectives at the national and international level. In Belgium it aims to unify the various Sunni communities around their interpretation of Islam.

Concerning the respect of human rights, the representatives of the GMB and the CICB answered "*Obviously, we will always respect Belgian laws. This has always been one of our priorities.*" However, when asked about the compatibility between the Cairo Declaration (asserting the supremacy of the sharia) and the European Convention on human rights, they said they did not know the European Convention but they would examine it without any delay... However, according to experts heard by the commission, the rejection of certain universal values is consubstantial with the Islam taught by that mosque as, by definition, they rely on the divine laws from which sharia proceeds.

According to the GMB/CICB representatives, their teachers come from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Senegal, and Gambia, amongst other places. They train future theologians, not imams, and for those who want to study Islam in Saudi Arabia, the ambassador, who is the

president of the CICB, is instrumental in providing them with a visa. It is not difficult to imagine what sort of Islam and sharia they want to learn and will learn in Saudi Arabia before coming back to Belgium or to another EU member state.

In the past, the CICB was in charge of designating teachers for the Muslim classes in public schools in Belgium and also organized the massive distribution of writings on Islam with a radical connotation. This has resulted in a significant impact on Islam in Belgium and on many Muslims. Since the 1990s, the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium (EMB), the official interlocutor of the Belgian state, has been in charge of the Muslim religion classes in public schools.

The GMB and the CICB continue to play a key role in the life of many Muslims in Belgium. The permits issued to those who slaughter animals for religious purposes, the registration of conversions to Islam, and the distribution of grants are still among the privileged competences that the GMB and CICB hold.

The average annual budget of the CICB/GMB for the last four years was approximately 1,433,000 EUR (which does not include donations in nature): 65% to 75% of their budget comes from the controversial *World Islamic League* (WIL) which has its seat in Saudi Arabia and whose Secretary General is the former Minister of Justice of Saudi Arabia...

Last but not least, the GMB has never asked to be officially recognized by the Belgian State. This unwillingness raises a number of concerns among the members of the Belgian Parliament as many areas in its activities remain opaque and outside the control of the authorities.

### ***Conclusions and recommendations***

At the end of Chapter One dedicated to Radical Islam and Islamic Radicalism in Belgium, the inquiry commission concludes that Salafism and Wahhabism exert a real and significant influence on Muslims in Belgium. The inquiry commission recognizes that these movements have used for decades and are still using their financial and diplomatic power to carry out their theocratic project in Belgium and in Europe. The inquiry commission points at mosques, religious training centers, publishing houses and other actors as disseminators of doctrines and practices that conflict with the founding principles of democracy, including – but not limited – equality between men and women.

The inquiry commission devotes 21 paragraphs (119-122, 129-134, 140-143, 146, 152-155, 162, 164) to recommendations countering problematic teachings leading to radicalism and violent radicalism. Such recommendations include:

- promoting the visibility of other forms of Islam by supporting their publishing projects, theatre plays and other artistic activities;
- supporting positive initiatives by civil society;
- maximizing the available technical and human resources for the monitoring of the dissemination of controversial teachings;
- collaborating with the OCAM in order to identify problematic social, cultural, religious and other organizations which might cause disturbance of public order or threaten national security;

- using existing legal possibilities, including the criminal code, to dissolve problematic associations which spread ideas infringing Belgian laws, including the law of 30 July 1981 against racism and xenophobia and the law of 10 May 2007 against discrimination;
- reinforcing the fight against hate preachers as they are the spokespersons of radical Islam/ violent radicalism, keeping in mind the jurisprudence of the European Court which rejected the argument of freedom of expression in a case of hate speech in Belgium (Belkacem v. Belgium (20 July 2017/ Application 34367/14); \*\*
- monitoring the financing of associations so that the grants cannot be used directly or indirectly for the promotion of radicalism/ violent radicalism;
- redoubling efforts to conclude more state recognition agreements with mosques as this contributes to social integration, transparency and control;
- reinforcing the surveillance of Muslim places of worship, especially the unrecognized mosques;
- improving the efficiency of the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium (EMB) as it is a privileged partner of the state in facilitating the integration of Islam and the Muslim community;
- maximizing the representativeness of all the components of the Muslim community of Belgium in the EMB.

(\*) Full report in French/ Dutch at <http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1752/54K1752009.pdf>

(\*\*) The case concerned the conviction of the leader and spokesperson of the organisation "Sharia4Belgium", which was dissolved in 2012, for incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence on account of remarks he made in YouTube videos concerning non-Muslim groups and Sharia. The Court noted that in his remarks Mr Belkacem had called on viewers to overpower non-Muslims, teach them a lesson and fight them. The Court considered that the remarks in question had a markedly hateful content and that Mr Belkacem, through his recordings, had sought to stir up hatred, discrimination and violence towards all non-Muslims. In the Court's view, such a general and vehement attack was incompatible with the values of tolerance, social peace and non-discrimination underlying the European Convention on Human Rights. With reference to Mr Belkacem's remarks concerning Sharia, the Court observed that it had previously ruled that defending Sharia while calling for violence to establish it could be regarded as "hate speech", and that each Contracting State was entitled to oppose political movements based on religious fundamentalism. The Court therefore rejected the application, finding that it was incompatible with the provisions of the Convention and that Mr Belkacem had attempted to deflect Article 10 of the Convention from its real purpose by using his right to freedom of expression for ends which were manifestly contrary to the spirit of the Convention.