

Belgian court decision blocking deportation of Brussels Grand Mosque imam appealed to the Council of State

HRWF (30.11.2017) - On 28 November, a Belgian court announced that it had struck down an effort to deport an imam at Belgium's oldest mosque, saying that Belgian immigration authorities had not provided sufficient evidence to prove that the cleric posed a serious threat to society. On the next day, the Belgian state secretary for asylum and migration, Theo Francken, announced that he would appeal to the Council of State against this ruling.

The Egyptian imam in question, Abdelhadi Sewif, has worked at the Grand Mosque of Brussels for 13 years, where 850 students attend religious and Arabic-language classes. When Sewif attempted to renew his residence permit, his application was rejected due to Theo Francken's accusations that he threatens Belgium's national security. Sewif has denied the accusations and has said that he was never able to review the evidence against him, because it was classified intelligence material.

The Grand Mosque of Brussels and community center, Belgium's biggest and oldest site of Muslim worship, is run by the controversial World Muslim League which has its seat in Mecca (Saudi Arabia) and whose Secretary General is the former Minister of Justice of Saudi Arabia...

A Belgian parliamentary inquiry commission, established after the double terrorist attack in Brussels in 2016, included in the recommendations of its October report (*), among other things, that the government should break the Saudi government's 99-year rent-free lease on the mosque.

The lease was handed to Saudi King Faisal in 1969 as a goodwill gesture by Belgian King Baudouin.

Officials in Belgium now say that the mosque is a hotbed for Saudi-backed Islamist extremism. Servais Verherstraeten, one of the leaders of the parliamentary commission, said that the mosque's leaders "are trying to live in their splendid isolation with a radical point of view, and their aim is not to integrate into our society. And that is a big problem."

Belgian lawmakers and counterterrorism officials have raised concerns about the unusual arrangement of foreign control of the mosque, which they say makes it less accountable to national authority. The Grand Mosque has indeed never asked to be officially recognized by the Belgian State, which would entail transparency and control of the authorities.

"We want in Belgium an Islam practiced by people who respect our constitution, who want to integrate into our country," Verherstraeten said. "There is the perception that there is something to hide in the most important mosque in the country."

During the hearings of the parliamentary commission, there was a consensus among the experts to say that the Islam promoted by the Grand Mosque is from the Salafist-Wahhabi current with a strong influence of the worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood. This conception of Islam, they said, rejects "the others" who do not share their teachings and leads to individual and collective self-isolation, marginalization and ghettoization. In Belgium, Salafist-Wahhabism aims to unify the various Sunni communities around their interpretation of Islam. (**)

As Prime News International explains:

"The sudden move against the Grand Mosque underscores the challenge for Western European leaders seeking to [create] what they call a home-grown "European Islam" that endorses pluralistic values. For too long, many officials say, they have stood by as imams preaching the ultraconservative interpretation of Islam favored by clerics in Saudi Arabia and Qatar have worked among their populations, encouraging the frustrated descendants of North African immigrants to isolate themselves from society."

(*) Report of the Belgian Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (French/Dutch): <http://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/54/1752/54K1752009.pdf>

(**) See HRWF paper "Belgian Parliamentary Report on Radical Islam and Islamic Radicalism" presented at the "Drivers and Catalysts of Radicalisation" briefing held at the European Parliament on 28 November: <http://hrwf.eu/forb/our-advocacy-papers/>

Media coverage of briefing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zv_t8L00JI
<https://brussels-express.eu/radicalisation-in-europe/>
<https://www.eureporter.co/frontpage/2017/11/30/extremists-accused-of-hijacking-identify-of-muslims-in-western-balkans/>