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The promise of the social contract: Muslim perspectives on the culturalization of citizenship and the demand to denounce violent extremism

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ABSTRACT

Since the 9/11 attacks, Muslims in Europe have been urged to denounce terrorism. Many Muslims experience a constant pressure to show that they are peaceful and loyal citizens. Based on archival material and semi-structured interviews, this article explores how Dutch Muslims deal with this pressure, and provides an analysis of critical interventions made by Muslims in public debate about violent extremism. What motivates some Muslims to speak up against acts of terror committed in the name of Islam, whereas other Muslims openly refuse to make such statements despite cherishing equally little support for such violence? This article provides crucial insights into the ways in which the “culturalization of citizenship” is reinforced and contested by those whose belonging in Dutch society is being questioned. It also raises questions about what it means for Muslims to “talk back” (as conceptualized by bell hooks) when the dominant majority urges them to talk.

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Introduction

Since the 9/11 attacks, Muslim minorities in Europe have been urged time and again to denounce terrorism. Not only religious leaders, but also ordinary Muslims have repeatedly been asked to mobilize against violence committed in the name of Islam. The pressure on the “silent majority” of Muslims to make explicit statements against terrorism has been exacerbated by a series of terrorist attacks by Muslims in Europe starting from the Madrid train bombings in March 2004, and the recent emergence of ISIS. Focusing on the Netherlands, this article explores how Muslims deal with this pressure, and provides an

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analysis of critical interventions made by Muslims in public debate about violent extremism. Although supporters of extremist movements such as ISIS certainly exist in the Netherlands, this article focuses on the vast majority of Dutch Muslims who do not support violent extremism. What motivates some Muslims to speak up against violence committed in the name of Islam, whereas other Muslims openly refuse to make such statements despite cherishing equally little support for such violence? And how does this relate to issues of citizenship and belonging?

In finding answers to these questions, I aim to contribute to cross-disciplinary debates about the “culturalization of citizenship”: the emergence of a new form of nationalism during the past decades, in which there is growing emphasis on the importance of shared norms and values, symbols and traditions, and a sense of identification and belonging. Especially those who are perceived as newcomers are increasingly expected to demonstrate their sense of belonging in, and their loyalty to the nation (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016, 3). This development can be observed across Western Europe (cf. Brown 2010), but the Dutch case can be seen as a particularly visible instance (Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016).

Scholars have critically addressed how the culturalization of citizenship contributes to the marginalization of Muslim minorities (Verkaaik 2009; Duyvendak 2011; Uitermark 2012; Mepschen 2016, 2018; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). With few exceptions (Uitermark 2012; Termeer 2016; Mepschen 2018), little attention has been paid to how Muslims challenge or uphold the discourses and practices through which they are marginalized. In taking seriously the active role played by Muslims in public debate about violent extremism, this article provides crucial new insights into the ways in which the culturalization of citizenship is being contested as well as reinforced by those whose belonging in Dutch society is continually being questioned. How do Muslims deal with the constant pressure that is exerted upon them to show that they are peaceful and loyal citizens?

This article also raises questions about what it means to “talk back”. Drawing on bell hooks’ work, I define “talking back” as an attempt to “speak as an equal to an authority figure”. For bell hooks, “talking back” is not simply a matter of using one’s voice, but to “make oneself heard” in a way that “confronts and disturbs others” and that “challenges politics of domination” (1989, 5–8). Inspired by bell hooks, Oumlil (2013) for example analyses how the Palestinian-American poet Suhair Hammad opposes stereotypes of Middle Eastern women in Western media, in a context where these women seldom get to speak for themselves. However, in the public debates that I study, Muslims are pressured by members of the dominant majority to speak up and break stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. This leads to the question: how do you “talk back” when a dominant party urges you to talk?

To get a general impression of the Dutch public debate about violent extremism and the need for Muslims to denounce terrorist attacks, I have collected Dutch newspaper articles that appeared between 11 September 2001 and 11 September 2016, and that contain statements made by Muslims against violence committed in the name of Islam, demands on Muslims to condemn terrorist attacks, or critiques against such demands. This resulted in a selection of about one thousand relevant articles.¹ A critical discourse analysis of these newspaper articles is combined with three case studies of critical interventions that have recently been made by Dutch Muslims in public debate, namely, the social media campaign *#NietMijnIslam* [#NotMyIslam], the inter-faith peace gathering *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* [Unity against Terrorism], and the YouTube video “Children Apologize for Terrorism”. The case studies are based on archival material (including news reports) and qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Per case study, one or two of the initiative-takers were asked about their motivations and personal reflections regarding their initiative.²

In the following sections, I will first elaborate on the culturalization of citizenship in the Netherlands. I will illustrate its key features through a famous lecture given by the Dutch Minister of Health in September 2016, in which she stresses the importance of the social contract as a binding force in a society characterized by ethnic and religious diversity. I then critically examine what I call the “promise of the social contract” – namely that newcomers will be accepted as equal citizens as long they endorse Dutch norms and values – by showing that there is a persistent divide between those whose national belonging is never contested, and those who continuously need to present themselves as “good citizens”. I show how this is exemplified in the often-repeated demand on Muslims to condemn terrorist attacks, and I discuss the implications of these demands for the position of Muslims in Dutch society. In the second half of this article I discuss the responses given by Dutch Muslims, showing that some of these responses can be seen as a “multiple critique” that targets different audiences at the same time (Cooke 2000). Finally, I analyze how Muslims negotiate the culturalization of citizenship, and reflect on what it means to “talk back” in this particular context.

The culturalization of citizenship

For a long time, Dutch society has been characterized by a hesitance to express nationalist feelings of any kind. Paradoxically, Dutch people tended to praise their own “relaxed” attitude towards the nation as one of those typical Dutch character traits through which their nation distinguishes itself from others. Kešić and Duyvendak (2016) refer to this as “anti-nationalist nationalism”. However, since the 1990s, it has increasingly given way to

more overt expressions of nationalism, in which shared norms and values, symbols and traditions, and a sense of identification and belonging play an important role. A “good” citizen feels at home in Dutch society, is loyal to the nation-state, and endorses secular liberal values such as individual autonomy, gender equality, LGBT emancipation and freedom of speech. Paradoxically, these values are construed as “universal” and “typically Dutch” at the same time (Verkaaik 2009; Duyvendak 2011; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016; Mepschen 2018).

Such an understanding of citizenship may seem inclusive to migrants and their descendants, as citizenship is supposedly based on virtues that can be acquired by anyone. However, the culturalization of citizenship operates through an essentialist notion of the nation as a home where some people belong and others do not. A symbolic boundary is drawn between a dominant majority of “native” Dutch (who are implicitly constructed as white, non-Muslim Dutch people without a recent family history of migration) and “new-comers”; i.e. groups of migrants and their descendants who continue to be represented as cultural Others and as guests in the national home (Duyvendak 2011; Mepschen 2016).

The latter particularly applies to Muslims, or people who are perceived as Muslims because of their name, nationality, clothing style, hair style and/or skin tone. The culturalization of citizenship goes hand in glove with the transformation of a diverse group of Dutch citizens into a separate and more or less homogeneous category of “Muslims”, who are then problematized in policies and debates. De Koning (2016) describes this process in terms of a “racialization” of Muslims. Islam tends to be seen as incompatible with Western values, and as a threat to “native” Dutch culture. Hence, identification with Islam is assumed to constrain, if not preclude membership in the Dutch civil community (Duyvendak 2011; Uitermark 2012; Beekers 2014; de Koning 2016; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016; Mepschen 2018).

A typical aspect of the culturalization of citizenship is that a wide variety of social problems that are commonly associated with these so-called newcomers are explained through their “failed” citizenship (Verkaaik 2009; Uitermark 2012). This also applies to “home-grown terrorism”. Counter-radicalization programmes rely on the assumption that particular (anti-Western) ideologies circulating among Muslims can be identified as precursors to terrorism, and that Muslims always remain vulnerable to such ideologies. The Dutch authorities, alongside many other European nation-states, increasingly resort to soft power measures to counter these ideologies, trying to make Muslims identify more closely with the nation-state and its “fundamental” values. Thus, the culturalization of citizenship feeds into the “securitization” of Islam and vice versa (Brown 2010; Kundnani 2014; Fadil, Ragazzi, and de Koning 2019).

“This social contract is in our genes”

The culturalization of citizenship is well exemplified by the *H.J. Schoo*-lecture given by then conservative-liberal Minister of Health Edith Schippers on 3 September 2016.³ In this much-discussed and highly praised lecture, Minister Schippers focuses on “the biggest concern of our time”, namely, the need to defend “our free society” against “cultural relativism” and against “encroaching fundamentalism” among Muslims. At the start of her lecture, she stresses the importance of the social contract:

Through friction, we have achieved something in this society. ... Shared norms and values. The engaging connection. Our beacons. A social contract. This contract has been fought over, consolidated, and written over decades. This contract is in our genes, and of course it can be endorsed by newcomers as well. That you are free to live the way you want, but that this freedom is limited by other people’s freedom. That all humans are equal: regardless of their faith, race, gender or sexual preference. That it is about your future, and not about your origins.

She then frames these norms and values as the achievements of a superior Dutch culture, arguing that “all cultures are not equal. Ours is a lot better than all others that I know of”. She lashes out at migrants who want to live in the Netherlands without entering into the social contract, and discusses a long list of problems that supposedly result from their failed citizenship. These include the oppression of women within Muslim communities, hatred and violence against homosexuals, Dutch Muslim youth joining jihadist groups in Syria, and terrorist attacks (“an attack on our way of life, our culture, and our freedoms”).

It is noteworthy how she subtly slips from discourses about contemporary migrants and refugees into discourses about old migrants and their descendants, and from discourses about newcomers into discourses about Dutch Muslims – as if all immigrants are Muslim, and as if all Muslims are immigrants. What is even more striking is how she presents terrorism and conservative gender ideologies as two sides of the same coin. As Schippers says: “These are no incidents. These are cultures clashing. Here, bit by bit, the core values of our society are being affected. ... We cannot ignore the attacks on our freedom – neither the silent, creeping attacks nor the violent ones.” For Schippers, the solution lies only partly in immigration control and the providing of civic integration courses. She ends her lecture by saying:

It is about time that we – all Dutch people who love our culture, our freedoms, our social contract – rise up and actively defend our achievements. We have to form a freedom coalition. And we really need everyone. Everyone is welcome in that coalition: allochthones and autochthones, Muslims, Christians and atheists, gays and transsexuals, Left and Right, man and woman, young and old, conservative and progressive. ... Because if we carry our freedom so far that we accept that others undermine it, we can lose it in the blink of an eye.

The conditional belonging of Muslims

The kind of nationalism that Schippers promotes contains an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Schippers emphasizes the social contract as a binding force between all citizens. This social contract seems to entail an attractive promise to newcomers: as long as they endorse Dutch values and follow the “written and unwritten rules” of the country, they will become accepted and find belonging in Dutch society. However, Schippers also presents the social contract as a cultural achievement of a select group of “native” citizens who have this contract “in their genes”. Those who are construed as newcomers can at best subscribe to this contract, and should be grateful for being allowed to join in. In other words, while this new nationalism may *seem* open to newcomers and thus “not racist” – which is precisely what has enabled overt expressions of nationalism to gain acceptance in the Netherlands – a shared ancestry, a shared history, and a shared cultural heritage matter more than most Dutch people would want to admit.

The culturalization of citizenship puts Dutch citizens who are Muslim in a liminal position between insider and outsider. Unlike radical right-wing politicians such as Geert Wilders, Schippers does not maintain that a Muslim can never be Dutch. She explicitly distinguishes between “extremists” and “benevolent, freedom-loving Dutch Muslims.” At the same time, she implicitly distinguishes between Dutch “natives”, whose abiding by the social contract she takes for granted, and “newcomers” (i.e. Muslims), whose entering into the social contract she questions. Verkaaik (2009) as well as Duyvendak (2011) observe that those who are perceived as newcomers are increasingly expected to demonstrate their sense of belonging in, and their loyalty to Dutch society. This includes the warning that immigrants who do not manage to feel at home should disappear altogether. Dutch Muslims’ belonging in the Netherlands is “conditional” (de Waal 2017) in the sense that they have to take extraordinary efforts to be acknowledged as equal citizens, and their belonging always remains precarious. As I will elaborate in the following section, it is precisely in this light that the demand on Muslims to denounce terrorism has to be understood.

Muslims, where do you stand?

Those who ask Muslims to denounce violent extremism are almost always members of the dominant majority, in the sense that they are white, non-Muslim Dutch people without a recent family history of migration. A frequently used argument is that the “silent majority” of peaceful Muslims should take greater efforts to gain trust from the non-Muslim majority and to change the dominant image of Islam as a violent religion. This means that Muslims are given the main responsibility for removing the prejudices

and suspicions of the dominant majority, while the dominant majority is supposedly entitled to define whether Muslims have sufficiently denounced violent extremism. What is overlooked is that Dutch Muslims have made countless statements against violent extremism since the 9/11 attacks, and that these statements receive little recognition in public debate. Moreover, it is impossible for Muslims to disprove the often-made accusation that they secretly support Al Qaeda or ISIS, because statements against violent extremism can always be framed as a form of *taqiyya* (dissimulation). All in all, these demands do not eliminate mistrust, but reinforce a “gaze of suspicion” towards Muslims (van Es 2018).

After the Madrid train bombings and the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, an additional argument became that Muslims should counter home-grown terrorism by delegitimizing violence committed in the name of Islam. In this case, it may seem as if Muslims are positively included in a collective struggle against violent extremism. Yet, their being addressed separately implies that Muslims have to protect the dominant majority against other Muslims, instead of their being recognized as normal citizens who are entitled to protection against terrorism by the state. Besides, it is questionable whether those who commit acts of terror in the name of Islam really care what other Muslims think of them, especially since most victims of Al Qaeda and ISIS are Muslims themselves.

Regardless of the precise argumentation, Muslims are collectively held accountable for crimes committed by a very small number of Muslims. As such, demands on Muslims to denounce violent extremism reflect (and reinforce) the unequal power relations between Muslims and the dominant majority. It is striking that members of the dominant majority are not being held similarly accountable when violent crimes are committed by people with somewhat similar beliefs or a similar cultural background. For example, when the Norwegian right-wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in Oslo and Utøya on 22 July 2011, no-one demanded from all right-wing oriented Europeans that they denounced these terrorist attacks. It is also noteworthy that Muslims are only asked to condemn terrorist attacks that happen in Europe and the US, and not the numerous attacks committed by Muslim extremists in countries with a Muslim majority population.

Furthermore, it is striking that many politicians and opinion makers who urge Muslims to denounce violent extremism explicitly connect this to the inclusion of Muslims in Dutch society. Take for example the influential opinion maker Paul Scheffer after the murder of Theo van Gogh:

Moderate Muslims who live here with ambitions will have to speak up. This is so important right now: the future of coexistence in large cities is under pressure, and the connection of our Muslims with the foundations of our society is more

wanted now than ever before. The silence and avoidance of the last years will no longer suffice. (Het Parool, 3 November 2004)

After Dutch Muslims condemned the Charlie Hebdo shootings in Paris in January 2015, opinion maker Hans van Zon commented: “The Islamic community has come to the understanding that it will lose its position in the Netherlands if it does not turn its back against the perpetrators” (*Algemeen Dagblad*, 10 January 2015).

In short, the often-repeated demand on Muslims to explicitly condemn violent extremism puts strong pressure on Dutch Muslims, where not only the dominant image of Islam, but also their right to belong in the Netherlands is at stake. In order to become accepted as “normal” citizens, Muslims who already hold formal citizenship have to keep proving that they are peaceful and loyal to the nation. Paradoxically, they have to do this while speaking as Muslims, which is precisely that part of their identity that supposedly sets them apart from the norm.

Muslims striving for a “Civil Islam”

Although most people who ask Muslims to denounce violent extremism belong to the dominant majority, such demands have also been made by Muslims. One of the first to do so was the well-known Islamic studies scholar Tariq Ramadan, who would later serve as an integration adviser to the city council of Rotterdam. Short after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, he wrote in an opinion piece in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*:

It is precisely now that we should be present, express ourselves, and explain our Islamic beliefs, including its spirituality, its principles, and its requirement of justice and peace. ... We must denounce statements and acts that legitimize violence and that mutilate and derail our religion. (Trouw, 12 October 2001)

Since then, similar demands have been made by numerous leaders of Islamic organizations in the Netherlands, and by a number of prominent politicians and opinion makers who are Muslim. In 2010 for example, the Moroccan-Dutch MP Ahmed Marcouch remarked that the only way to counter the rise of the radical right-wing politician Geert Wilders was to “start a movement of benevolent Moroccans who denounce street criminals and radicals” and to “show publicly that we love the Netherlands and contribute to this society” (*de Volkskrant*, 15 June 2010).

The most prominent example is probably that of the Moroccan-Dutch mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, who has repeatedly condemned terrorism in strong words and urged other Muslims to do the same. Immediately after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, he said in a televised interview: “I am sitting here as the mayor of Rotterdam, but also as a furious

Muslim. ... It is very important that Muslims denounce these attacks in large numbers." He then continued:

It is incomprehensible that you can turn against this freedom [of expression]. But if you cannot stand that freedom, for God's sake, pack your bags and leave. ... Disappear if you cannot find your place in the Netherlands, how we want to build a society here. Because we only want people here who ... , including all those Muslims – those benevolent Muslims who will now probably be held accountable for this – we want to keep all those people together, in what I call the "We-Society". If you don't like it here, because you can't stand the fact that humourists make a little newspaper ... Well, can I put it this way: "Get lost"? (NOS, 7 January 2015)

What Ramadan, Marcouch and Aboutaleb have in common is that they identify as committed Muslims while emphasizing the importance of good citizenship. Furthermore, all of them seem deeply concerned about violence committed in the name of Islam, as well as the position of Muslims in Dutch society. Uitermark (2012) refers to Ramadan, Marcouch and Aboutaleb as proponents of a "Civil Islam": an understanding of Islam that has emerged in response to claims that Islam is an impediment to civil engagement in Western societies. The core premises of Civil Islam are that Islam demands full participation in society, and that the religion is fully compatible with the norms and values enshrined in the Dutch constitution. According to Uitermark, a discourse of Civil Islam does not negate the culturalization of citizenship, but depends upon and interacts with it. It confirms the idea that Muslim "newcomers" should take more efforts to integrate and participate in Dutch society. However, instead of seeing Islam as a problem, proponents of Civil Islam argue that Islam has the potential to turn Muslims into better citizens.

My argument is that this discourse of Civil Islam reinforces rather than challenges the promise of the social contract. The statements made by Ramadan, Marcouch and Aboutaleb reveal a strong hope that if Dutch Muslims became more committed and responsible citizens, anti-Muslim sentiments would ultimately disappear. Statements such as those by Aboutaleb about Muslim extremists who have to "get lost" can be understood as attempts to shift the symbolic boundary between "Dutch natives" and "Muslim newcomers" in such a way that a large majority of "good" Muslims become included in Dutch society, albeit at the expense of a small minority of "bad" Muslims who do not adhere to the social contract. In later interviews, Aboutaleb clarified that he only meant to exclude those Muslims who resort to violence; not all Muslims who are critical to particular Dutch norms and values (*Trouw*, 22 December 2017). Nevertheless, the fact remains that members of the dominant majority are never asked to leave the country, even if they violently break the social contract. In terms of "talking back" to the dominant majority, Ramadan, Marcouch

and Aboutaleb oppose dominant representations of Muslims and Islam, but they do not question the terms and conditions upon which Muslims are supposed to find inclusion in Dutch society. It is thus highly questionable to what extent their statements challenge the politics of domination.

Muslims raising their voices

The often-repeated demand on Muslims to denounce terrorism creates the impression that Muslims have seldom expressed themselves against violent extremism. However, my search in online newspaper archives reveals that Muslim individuals and organizations have made innumerable statements against violent extremism since the 9/11 attacks in 2001. After every terrorist attack committed by Muslim extremists in Europe or the US, Dutch Muslims and their organizations have issued press releases, written opinion pieces, organized protests and commemorations, joined protest marches that were organized by non-Muslims, addressed terrorism in Friday sermons, and, last but not least, answered countless questions from journalists about “what they think of terrorism”. These are probably only a tip of the iceberg: many more of such statements may never have received any press coverage at all.

Recently, two initiatives have drawn comparatively large numbers of participants and received broad media coverage in the Netherlands: the social media campaign *#NietMijnIslam* [*#NotMyIslam*] and the interfaith peace gathering *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* [Unity against Terrorism]. *#NietMijnIslam* was started by a group of five Moroccan-Dutch Muslim friends right after the Charlie Hebdo attacks by ISIS-affiliated terrorists in Paris on 7 January 2015. Being strongly concerned about violence committed in the name of Islam, and worried about the possible consequences of the attacks for the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Dutch society, they decided the same evening to start a Facebook page that could serve as a platform for Muslims who wanted to express their abhorrence of the attacks, and where Muslims and non-Muslims could enter into conversation with each other. They chose the name “Not My Islam” to tell the world that terrorists did not represent their religion, without entering into essentialist discussions about “true” Islam, and without claiming that the perpetrators were not Muslims. In this respect, their statement contrasted strongly with many statements previously made by Muslims, countering stereotypical representations of a violent Islam with equally essentialist representations of Islam as a religion of peace (van Es 2018).

In the late evening of 7 January, they created a Facebook page and posted video messages in which they condemned the attacks. Their first statement on their page read:

Enough is enough. We refuse to not raise our voices. ... We are the “silent majority” that is being overlooked, because we have never been silent. We are those Muslims who respect and cherish the Dutch democratic legal order. We are those Muslims who have been brought up with the idea that Islam is a religion of peace. ... We are the Dutch Muslims and we have a message for you. ... We speak up against the ideas and acts of extremists who commit these acts in the name of our Islam. We do this because it is our responsibility to protect our religion against those who abuse and violate Islam. We refuse to be associated with murderers who claim that their atrocities should be committed in our name and that of Islam. To these people we shout: “This is not my Islam”.

The next day, the page had already been “liked” by thousands of people, and the initiative-takers received calls from numerous journalists who wanted to make news reports. Ultimately, the page received almost 30.000 likes, and one of the video clips was watched about 2 million times. Sometimes, about 90.000 people were simultaneously interacting on the Facebook page. Even today, Muslims and non-Muslims keep posting messages against terrorism and against Islamophobia.

The interfaith peace gathering *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* was organized in Rotterdam, three days after the Bataclan attacks by ISIS-affiliated terrorists in Paris on 13 November 2015. The initiative for the commemoration was taken by Nourdin El Ouali, leader of the local, Islam-inspired political party NIDA. The idea was to gather a large crowd in front of the *Essalam* mosque at the *Vredesplein* [Peace square] in Rotterdam, so that followers of different religions could mourn the attacks together and make a statement for peaceful coexistence. On a platform that had been set up in front of the mosque, a Protestant priest, a humanist, a rabbi and an imam shared their religious perspectives on peace. The speakers also included Rotterdam mayor Aboutaleb and Minister of Justice Ard van der Steur. At the end, participants handed out flowers to each other and left white balloons in the air. The event was hosted by El Ouali himself, who said: “Every human being with a heart and a moral conscience is moved by these horrible terrorist attacks, and feels for all the victims” (NOS, 16 November 2015). Almost one thousand people participated, and the event was covered by a variety of regional and national news media (see for example: *Trouw*, 16 November 2015; *Algemeen Dagblad*, 17 November 2015).

Making statements beyond the dominant frame

Interestingly, the men and women who organized these events were themselves highly critical of the pressure exerted on Muslims to denounce violent extremism. They felt an intrinsic need to make a statement, but they strongly rejected the idea that Muslims have a special duty to “disavow” acts of violence. Particularly the Dutch term *afstand nemen* [“taking distance”]

suggests that Muslims actively have to create a distance between themselves and the perpetrators in order to avoid guilt by association. Both events can be seen as attempts to move beyond the “dominant frame”, as the initiative-takers call it. Mostafa Hilali, one of the five friends who started the *#NietMijnIslam* campaign, explains:

For us, this was not about “disavowing” terrorism. We never did that. ... The murderers had already distanced themselves from all those 1.499.999.999 Muslims in the world who do not use violence. Why would I then have to disavow the perpetrators? Instead, we wanted to stand up for our religion. ... We do not accept that these people justify their actions by claiming that this is what Islam says. ... The image of our religion is being tainted because of what they do. ... We wanted to express ourselves. But it was not a response to a demand made by others. If somebody tries to force me into doing something, I will by default not do it. (Mostafa Hilali, interviewed on 5 May 2017)

It is important to note that neither the initiative-takers of *#NietMijnIslam*, nor those of *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* wanted to put pressure on Muslims to participate. As Naima Ajouaaou from *#NietMijnIslam* remembers:

We did not demand from anyone to make a statement. Everybody should do what he or she wants, and what he or she feels good about. But, we said, if you also want to speak up, then this is a platform that you could use. (Naima Ajouaaou, interviewed on 3 July 2018)

The organizers of *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* went one step further, in the sense that they wanted to condemn the Bataclan attacks as human beings and not as Muslims. One of the reasons for organizing the event as an interfaith gathering was to break the one-sided focus on Muslims and Islam in debates about violence. The organizers wanted to make a statement for peaceful coexistence on their own terms and conditions, and show the strength of uniting people without denying their diversity (Nourdin El Ouali, interviewed on 14 June 2017). However, their initiative also exemplifies the difficulty (or impossibility) of moving entirely beyond the dominant frame. After all, NIDA did want to make it clear that the initiative had been taken by Muslims, which is why the event took place in front of a mosque and was hosted by El Ouali himself. Otherwise, there was a risk that the event would hardly get any recognition at all, and that Muslims would afterwards again become accused of not condemning the attacks.

Negotiating the symbolic boundary between “Dutch natives” and “Muslim newcomers”

Both events can also be seen as attempts to blur the symbolic boundary that is commonly drawn between “Dutch natives” and “Muslim newcomers”, and to assert the belonging of Muslims in Dutch society. The *#NietMijnIslam* campaign clearly emphasized the “Dutch-ness” of Dutch Muslims. Hilali explains

that it remains important to do so, precisely because some people keep questioning this belonging:

Being Dutch is something that could unite us. ... Being a Hollander [a white, almost stereotypically Dutch person from the Western provinces of the Netherlands] cannot unite us: it is sort of an ethnicity. ... But I am certainly Dutch. No one can take that away from me, as long as Dutch law recognizes my Dutch citizenship. And that's why I think it is very important. You can be a Muslim, a Jew, an atheist, you can have a Surinamese background, you can be transgender, but we are all Dutch. As soon as you start undermining that, for example by questioning some people's loyalty, it has far-reaching consequences. ... For me, being Dutch means that I say: this is my country and I feel at home here. It is a lot of fun to go on a holiday, but when I return at Schiphol, I think: "Oh, how nice to be home again!" (Mostafa Hilali, interviewed on 5 May 2017)

Generally speaking, the local party NIDA stresses the belonging of Muslims in Rotterdam rather than in the Netherlands as a whole. However, the organizers of *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* were clearly trying to blur the boundary between "Dutch natives" and "Muslim newcomers" by letting people of different faiths and backgrounds stand shoulder to shoulder. El Ouali often says that "the real ideological gap is not between Muslims and non-Muslims, but between benevolent and malevolent people who can be of any religion" (Nourdin El Ouali, interviewed on 14 June 2017).

In some respects, one could see *#NietMijnIslam* and *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* as performances of a Civil Islam. However, much more than Aboutaleb for example, the initiative-takers are highly critical of the belief that Muslims should take extraordinary efforts to become accepted as equal citizens. They do not reject the importance of shared values or of "feeling at home", but they certainly do not support the idea that Dutch Muslims' belonging in Dutch society depends on their adherence to a social contract. In that sense, they reject an important element of the culturalization of citizenship. As El Ouali says, "it is the Dutch law that defines who is a citizen" and "if you ask people for their acceptance, you make people bigger or stronger than they actually are" (Nourdin El Ouali, interviewed on 14 June 2017).

#NietMijnIslam and *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* can both be seen as a "multiple critique" that targets different audiences at the same time. This term was coined by Cooke (2000) in her analysis of Islamic feminism. In arguing for women's rights with reference to the Qur'an and hadith, Islamic feminists simultaneously criticize patriarchal practices among Muslims, the male monopoly on interpreting sacred texts, Western stereotypes about Islam as inherently oppressive, and the very idea that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron. Somewhat similarly, the organizers of *#NietMijnIslam* and *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme* simultaneously criticized acts of terror committed in the name of Islam, the suspicion in Dutch society that many Muslims support this violence, stereotypical representations of Islam

as a religion that promotes violence, and the demand on Muslims to prove that they are peaceful and loyal citizens.⁴ Thus, in terms of “talking back” to the dominant majority, the organizers not only opposed dominant representations of Muslims and Islam. They also tried to speak as an equal to the dominant majority by making a statement on their own terms and conditions, and not in direct response to a demand made by members of that majority. However, these two cases also show how the opportunity to speak on one’s own terms and conditions is constrained by a perceived need to make oneself heard in public debate.

Refusing to play the game

Last but not least, there are Muslims who directly criticize the demand on Muslims to denounce violent extremism, and who openly refuse to comply: not because they feel any support for extremist movements, but because they no longer want to be addressed as a problem category with a special relationship to terrorism. They perceive that no matter how often they express themselves against crimes committed in the name of their religion, anti-Muslim sentiments do not fade. Although such voices have been present in public debate at least since the 9/11 attacks, they can be heard more and more often (see for example: *Het Parool*, 29 September 2001; *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 April 2002; *de Volkskrant*, 11 November 2004; *Trouw*, 8 October 2014; *Het Parool*, 25 October 2014; *de Volkskrant*, 12 January 2015).⁵

On 4 February 2015, the Moroccan-Dutch filmmaker Abdelkarim El-Fassi launched a YouTube video that completely ridicules the demand. In the movie clip, titled “Children Apologize for Terrorism”, adults force young children to denounce acts of terror committed by people who “look just like them”. A number of Moroccan-Dutch boys are told that they resemble Muslim terrorists and that they should condemn terrorism, while a blond toddler is forced to say “sorry” for what Breivik did in Norway. The clip ends with the text: “Guilt by association divides us. #Let’s unite.”⁶ The movie clip went viral on social media, and was soon picked up by mainstream news media (See, for example: *Trouw*, 5 February 2015; *Algemeen Dagblad*, 6 February 2015; *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 February 2015).

El-Fassi explains that #Let’s unite was about revealing a mechanism where people impose a sense of collective guilt on others. Moreover, the movie clip shifts attention away from religion towards racism, exposing how Muslims are first and foremost addressed on the basis of their appearance and not on their religious beliefs (Abdelkarim El-Fassi, interviewed on 18 June 2018). The idea for the movie arose when El-Fassi discussed the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks with his friend Nourdin El Ouali – the same person who would later organize *Eenheid tegen Terrorisme*. Both were frustrated about the ongoing pressure on Muslims to denounce terrorism. El-Fassi and his

team from Zouka Media made the video, while El Ouali used his NIDA contacts to gain publicity (Nourdin El Ouali, interviewed on 14 June 2017). El-Fassi and El Ouali played the main roles in the film: El Fassi can be seen together with his nephew, while El Ouali features with his own son. The film was clearly made to cause a shock effect, and the treatment of the children provoked much criticism from all sides of the political spectrum. However, in a written statement accompanying the YouTube video, El-Fassi said:

I've never felt this uncomfortable while directing a video. Sure, it's totally unethical and pedagogically irresponsible, and yet as a society we've practiced this on a macro-level for years. We've been talking certain communities into feelings of collective guilt for years. This has to stop; otherwise the problem will fester on for generations to come. I don't want my nephew Hamza, who can be seen in the film, to be held accountable for matters that have nothing to do with him. He is a third generation Dutch-Moroccan. There is no justification whatsoever for him being treated differently from his white peers. (Zouka Media, 4 February 2015)

All in all, the video created an enormous response. El-Fassi remembers that he even received a personal message from Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher, saying that the video had inspired him to think. The video can be seen as a form of "talking back" where people send out a message that directly confronts the politics of domination, and that is heard by at least some of those who are being addressed.

Nevertheless, in his later work, El-Fassi has radically steered away from making statements in direct response against anti-Islam or anti-immigration discourses. His latest two documentary films are portraits of his parents.⁷ El-Fassi explains: "For a long time, I have been working very reactively. But I do not exist by the grace of what other people tell about me." He sees his documentary films as an experiment, and as a different, more autonomous way of making a critical intervention in public debate: "Could I portray my father simply in a human way, like a grandfather, a father, a husband, with the same fears, dreams and ambitions that other people also have?" (Abdelkarim El-Fassi, interviewed on 18 June 2018). These two films have become very popular in the Netherlands, especially – but not exclusively – among Moroccan-Dutch youth. El-Fassi's words are reminiscent of Termeer's (2016) work on Dutch artists with a Muslim background who deliberately do not address their religion or ethnicity in their art work. In doing so, they claim a certain form of autonomy to tell their own story. However, precisely because they steer away from the dominant discourse, their productions are not legible for most people as a form of resistance. El-Fassi remarks that he is still not opposed to people making reactive statements, but he thinks it should be a conscious choice.

Furthermore, El-Fassi has become sceptical about a particular dynamic he observes, where Muslims strongly emphasize their Dutch identity in order to

counter the idea that Muslims cannot be truly Dutch. The video “Children Apologize for Terrorism” can be seen as a critique against the unequal treatment of Muslims. As El-Fassi says, “the mechanism of guilt by association is also a matter of social exclusion, because it entails a double standard” (Abdelkarim El-Fassi, interviewed on 18 June 2018). On the other hand, El-Fassi thinks it is problematic when Muslims engage in all kinds of nationalistic behaviour:

It looks a bit strained, you know, when I see that we suddenly have to be super happy when Dutch Moroccans support the Dutch football team. Look, I see the importance of a local or national identity, but sometimes it appears to me as a strained form of nationalism. I think that’s problematic, and it doesn’t do justice to the wider world and all the opportunities you have there. ... Why would you cling to the Netherlands in such a reactive way? After all, it is only a small country ... (Abdelkarim El-Fassi, interviewed on 18 June 2018)

Arguing for a more cosmopolitan attitude, he offers perhaps the most profound critique of the culturalization of citizenship, saying: “Maybe it is just fine not to feel at home anywhere”. From this perspective, the most radical form of “talking back” is not to talk “back”.

Discussion

The culturalization of citizenship entails a dynamic where the Dutch identity is increasingly celebrated, while the national belonging of Muslims is questioned more than ever before. For Muslims who try to find acceptance for themselves and their religion in Dutch society, it is hard *not* to reinforce the importance of “being Dutch”. In this article, I have analyzed how Muslims position themselves in relation to the culturalization of citizenship by examining a number of critical interventions made by Muslims in public debate about violent extremism. Although some Muslims condemn terrorism in strong words and urge other Muslims to do the same, others are highly critical of the constant pressure to prove that they are peaceful and loyal citizens. In their perception, the “promise of the social contract” remains unfulfilled regardless of the efforts that Muslims take.

Inspired by bell hooks, I have also raised questions about what it means for Muslim minorities to “talk back” when the dominant majority urges them to talk. For some Muslims, this means trying to make statements for peaceful coexistence on their own terms and conditions. For others, it means to openly criticize demands on Muslims to denounce violent extremism, or even to decide not to engage in public debates about violent extremism at all. For the dominant majority, the latter strategy is virtually illegible as a critique. However, for some Dutch Muslims, it is an important strategy to be able to live their lives as individuals, without always having to relate to anti-Muslim sentiments.

All in all, this article shows the importance of studying dynamics of marginalization and resistance to understand the emergence of particular forms of nationalism in a given time and context. The focus of this article has been on the public sphere. How the conditional belonging of Muslims plays out in everyday interactions between citizens is a topic for future research.

Notes

1. Relevant newspaper articles were collected through the online database *Lexis-Nexis*. The keywords used are: "(*moslim** OR *islam**) AND (*afstand nemen* OR *veroordelen* OR *afwijzen* OR *distantiëren* OR *uitspreken tegen* OR *afschuw*)". Sources included national and regional newspapers, and press releases from the Dutch news agency ANP.
2. The interviews were conducted with the participants' informed consent, and all participants have been given the opportunity to check their quotes. Translations are by the author.
3. The *H.J. Schoo* lecture is part of an annual event organized by the Liberal Conservative opinion magazine *Elsevier*. Each year, the magazine invites a different prominent politician or opinion maker to give a lecture about a self-chosen topic. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2016/09/05/de-paradox-van-de-vrijheid> (last accessed: 15 July 2018).
4. The observation that statements against violent extremism can be seen as a "multiple critique" is also made by Van den Brandt regarding Belgium (2017, 138).
5. The demand is also increasingly criticized by Dutch people who are not Muslim.
6. For a direct link to the movie clip with English subtitles, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYyN1I5F8E> (last accessed: 7 August 2018).
7. *Mijn Vader de Expat* [My Father the Expat] (2014) and *Toen Ma Naar Mars Vertrok* [When Mom Left for Mars] (2017).

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