EILANDEN IN EEN ZEE VAN ONGELOOF
HET VERZET VAN ACTIVISTISCHE DA’WA-NETWERKEN IN BELGIË, NEDERLAND EN DUITSLAND

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Summary

Part I – Perspective and Reflection

On March 31, 2010 Sharia4Belgium activists disrupted a lecture which was being given by the Dutch author, Benno Barnard, at the University of Antwerp. This marked the start of a series of actions carried out by this group, led by Abu Imran, which claimed as its goal the implementation of Sharia in Belgium. The disruption of the debate attracted a lot of attention and was, in part, responsible for the reputation that Sharia4Belgium had which extended way beyond any national borders. Contemporaneously three other networks emerged, two in Germany: Die Wahre Religion and Millatu Ibrahim, and one in the Netherlands: Street Dawah. A fourth network, the Team Free Saddik / Behind Bars, which focused on actions demonstrating solidarity with political prisoners already existed in the Netherlands. All four networks have much in common; their member activists usually knew one another, they adhered to more or less the same ideology, and the style of their performance, which we summarize under the term activist da’wa (mission) was very similar. Salafist networks in the past had usually performed da’wa within mosques, but these da’wa activists came out of seclusion and disseminated their message in public. This was not entirely unique though: initiatives like this had occurred in the Netherlands and Belgium before, but had usually been limited to a few events (like Queen’s Day) or were actions like those recently introduced by another organization (Waaromislam in the Netherlands) which did not engage with the public and/or the state in any type of confrontational way.

In this report we analyze the sort of activism employed by Sharia4Belgium, Sharia4Holland, Die Wahre Religion, the Pierre-Vogel network, Millatu Ibrahim (and its successor Tauhid Germany), Behind Bars and Street Dawah. The central question we ask here is how the activism of the da’wa networks during the period 2009-2013 interact with the practices of the government and media.

In analyzing the activist da’wa networks we treat their activism as a particular mode of resistance which we term counter-conduct. This type of activism is not only about activities that are directly aimed at protesting against the state and its regulation of Muslims, but also about activities that engender an alternative regulation and self-regulation. Counter-conduct is not just about activism against something, but also involves the creation of one’s ‘own’ space, a space in which people can regulate themselves free from government interference, media interference and the insults of Islam, and in which the individual can work on self-realization, determining this in their own terms. Counter-conduct is therefore also an attempt to create alternative ways of living and alternative answers to the question ‘who am I supposed to be?’ In the case of the da’wa activists, achieving self-realization and piety through da’wa is based on a particular reading of Islam and the activists attempt to convince people that this alternative is more just and satisfying than the models proclaimed by the state, opinion leaders and other Muslims. It is precisely the dual nature of counter-conduct (resisting and seeking an
alternative and the interaction between both) that distinguishes it from other forms of resistance. Counter-conduct, therefore, also includes the formation of the self, a self based on ideas about a good, virtuous life and bringing those ideas into practice. At the same time, of course, these alternatives may go against the trends in policies and debates that emphasize the importance of secular values and freedoms, sexual freedoms and loyalty to the nation state.

In the case of the present networks practice daʿwa as counter-conduct also translates into a specific form of protest we call spectacle activism. This is a form of protest in which not only content, but also visual and auditory forms create a situation which a third party is almost bound to respond to. Through spectacle activism daʿwa activists create an oppositional argument: they express grievances and objections - in both form and content - at a given situation. In this case, it is also about creating media-shows or media events: forms of verbal rhetoric that combine content, auditory and visual forms, with the aim of criticizing and producing controversies that reach the media.

In sum, we analyze the nature of the daʿwa networks activism and, in particular, how it develops in a continuous interaction between the networks, the media and the government. More concretely we investigate the following themes and questions:

1. **Ideological cleavages and dynamics:** What do the protests focus on and what are the answers provided by the activists? Protests do not fall from the sky. There are always one or more concrete reasons, certain things are magnified and others remain un- or under-exposed. Against what and whom are the actions of daʿwa activist networks directed? In addition, protests always have a theatrical side: activists focus on a specific audience and adapt to it by adjusting the content and style of the message. Furthermore, what alternative ideals and views are they bringing to the fore? How do they respond to opponents and what is reaction do these activists stimulate?

2. **Alternative knowledge and knowledge channels:** How do activists support their claims? What are their knowledge channels? The former theme usually relates to the substantive claims the activists make; here the focus is on particular types of knowledge, rationalizations and legitimations. But how do activists counter the rationality and legitimacy of their opponents? How do their opponents react and how, in turn, do the activists react to that?

3. **Repertoires of activism:** What kind of techniques and practices are used: demonstrations, disturbances, public sermons, slogans, flag-waving, clothing, etc.? How do these techniques relate to the claims made by opponents? How do they create a spectacle? What are the reactions of opponents to this repertoire and how do activists, in turn, react to that?
4. Subjectivity: Whereas the government aims to produce integrated (liberal) Muslims and categorizes groups outside this definition as 'radical', 'jihadist' or 'terrorist', the activists oppose the imposition of such categories and strive for alternative ways of being and of regulating the self. But what concepts of self and identity are hidden behind the various aspects of activism and how do these forms of protest engender new identities and subjectivities through their interaction with media and government? How do the parties resist - either explicitly in their views, or implicitly – the categories that are imposed on them, such as 'radical' and 'terrorist' and what kind of alternative concepts of self, identity and subjectivity are proposed by the activists and how do they implement such concepts in their daily lives?

By analyzing the themes mentioned above we will try to explain how activists and opponents react to each other within the same political and social context, and how activists themselves give meaning to the political context and fashion themselves as subjects who oppose the dominant regulation of Muslims.

Our fieldwork consists of interviews, offline and online observations, Facebook discussions and chats, and numerous informal conversations with activists and other stakeholders. Many activists during our investigation, which began in 2012, left for Syria. This development brought about its own dynamics and resulted in the activists increasingly becoming the subject of discussions about the safety of government intervention. Our strategy to be present where the activists are as often as we can (but with mixed results in the three countries) and to maintain friendly but business-like contacts has yielded a lot, but has also meant that the researchers in an awkward tension with many methodological, ethical and strategic issues.

Part II
Belgium – The Activism of Sharia4Belgium
In the relatively short time that Sharia4Belgium was active after March 2010, it was able to generate enormous attention from media, politicians, security services and policy-makers. The activists wanted this attention, but it has ultimately had a destructive effect on the group. In a context of increasing pressure the majority of activists left Belgium to join in the struggle against the regime of al-Assad, whilst others were arrested and indicted or gave up their activism. In this report, we describe the nature of the activism of Sharia4Belgium, which was mainly characterized by spectacle activism through which ‘image events’ were created. The group received strong counter-reactions, which they interpreted as confirming their own views. The activists tried to claim their own space, by practicing their Islam, or engaging in public da’wa actions (including disturbances, demonstrations and provocative readings) or by doing Hijrah (migration to an ‘Islamic’ country). They tried to regulate their own lives through an alternative system which they set up themselves in opposition to the
hegemonic norms of the society which they regarded as oppressive and hypocritical. The activists called for Sharia and idealized the Islamic state; at the same time the claims for, and the maintenance of, their own space was very difficult. One of the problems facing the activists was how to define this space of their own. Furthermore, due to the growing attention that the group attracted from media and security services, an internal culture of control and distrust emerged which eventually led to the group falling apart. The group finally disbanded with the majority leaving for Syria, or any other Muslim country; others were arrested or relinquished their activism completely. The name Sharia4Belgium, however, remains and speaks to the imagination of public, activists and security forces. Whilst Sharia4Belgium may officially no longer exist, the legacy of the group is a specific type of activism whose content and form may inspire a new generation of activists.

Part III
The Netherlands – The Activism of Team Free Saddik / Behind Bars, Street Dawah and Sharia4Holland

The emergence of the da'wa activist networks in the Netherlands was the result of a complex interplay between personal factors, the counter-radicalization and integration policies, media attention and developments within the Muslim communities. This did not lead to the creation of strong and tightly run organizations, but to loose associations of friends, relatives and acquaintances who found each other in a shared ideology, camaraderie and brotherhood and in the ways they responded to specific issues. In the case of The Hague network, the War on Terror was brought close to home and subsequently rendered concrete and tangible through the arrests and incarceration of several of their friends. This experience led to the formation of Free Saddik and Behind Bars, groups formed in support of the prisoners.

Behind Bars / Team Free Saddik and Street Dawah received much less attention from policy makers and media than Sharia4Belgium and Sharia4Holland did, whose rapid rise and reputation were partly caused by reactions from politicians and media. This also meant that Sharia4Holland and Sharia4Belgium received a lot of harsh criticism from Muslims too, criticism which was later extended to other networks after discussions about Belgian and Dutch fighters in the Syrian Civil War gained steam.

In the midst of the debate about Islam, and later on about the Dutch fighters in Syria, the activists presented themselves (as a response to that debate) as fighters defending Muslims in a war against Islam conducted by the West. On the one hand they tried to shield their own environment from undesirable influences and focus on life as a devout Muslim, and on the other hand they sought to change that environment through their activism. Because of this lifestyle, some politicians and opinion makers claimed that Muslim practices and presence conflicted with so-called Dutch values,
integration and anti-radicalization. The Muslim lifestyle was, therefore, already political. But activists challenged and re-appropriated the definitions and policies which were imposed on them. They did this partly by ignoring the definitions and by opposing them in public, for example, in the case of the imminent ban of the face-veil. The activists began using their own channels to collect and disseminate knowledge to a wider audience. The Hague activists continually negotiated what would be an effective method of activism and what would not. The outcome was partly determined by their perception of the socio-political environment. Although they identified that a battle against Islam was ongoing, they thought its intensity was not the same everywhere and adjusted their mode of activism accordingly.

The investigation into the da'wa activism makes clear how collective identity and subjectivity emerged through a specific dimension of the life of da'wa activists (leisure), which developed into a protest against what they perceived of as the unjust treatment of Muslims. In that protest, the activists played a major role through their use of symbols such as the Islamic seal flag and by framing the police intervention at 'Hondius' as part of the war against Islam itself. The logic of their protest was thus also determined by the police action itself and because of the police perception of them as 'radical', 'causing nuisance' and as potential recruiters for the war in Syria. Through this perception police intervention was made possible and appeared legitimate and also attracted media attention. The police intervention also strengthened the activism as well as the ‘radicalization’ framework within which the media paid attention to them. As such the Hondius case created a strong collective identity; a process which none of the involved parties had complete control over. The cases of 'Hondius' and Abu Muhammad make clear that the activists were not just revolting against something or mobilizing people for that opposition. It was also about creating an alternative subjectivity, one that differs from what is accepted and considered 'normal' within the dominant policies and debates. For the activists these alternative rules offered 'real' freedom and redemption in the here and now as well as in the hereafter.

Part IV
Germany – The Activism of Millatu Ibrahim / Tauhid Germany, Die Wahre Religion and the Pierre Vogel Network

In 2014 three da’wa networks dominated the public da’wa activism in Germany: the networks of Tauhid Germany (former Millatu Ibrahim), Die Wahre Religion and the Pierre Vogel network. By the end of 2010, the environment of the da’wa scene had changed dramatically, caused in part by anti-Islamic activism and the local resistance against Salafist centers, and exacerbated by the repressive measures of the government. The riots on May 1 and 5, 2012 in Bonn and Solingen, which saw two policemen seriously injured by knife wounds, were the founding moments and also marked the end of Millatu Ibrahim as the network was banned in late May. At the end of 2013, the da’wa activists
became stronger again, especially with the return of Pierre Vogel from Egypt. The different German networks overlapped and solidarity only really existed under pressure from outside forces. There were strong internal divisions and fragmentation along ideological lines, for example, when methods of dealing with non-Islamic society in practice were discussed.

Since the end of 2012 Die Wahre Religion has maintained the longest daʿwa campaign to date: LIES! (READ!), a campaign in which activists in several cities in Germany distributed free copies of the Quran. This campaign was mainly organized locally via Facebook and Twitter and offered tools for activists from diverse Islamic trends. The campaign was shaped by the logic of connective action as opposed to collective action. The spectacle activism in these networks consisted mainly of the creation of confrontations; the riots of May 2012 are just one example. Usually opponents were challenged to a public debate. Although these debates did not take place, the prior discussion gave the activists the opportunity to react against others, and to claim the 'true Islam'. Solidarity with Muslim prisoners was an important topic within the networks. Activists tried to organize support for the prisoners and their families, and attended court proceedings. This form of action, Prozessbeobachtung, has its roots in secular left and radical right-wing movements. As occurred in the Belgian and Dutch cases, some forms of activism were aimed at creating and securing a place of their own in society by organizing public barbecues and setting up groups in youth and community centers.

The activism of these three networks and their supporters expressed itself in various forms of counter-conduct. Millatu Ibrahim / Tauhid Germany withdrew and stressed the al-wala ‘wa’l-barā’ especially in dealing with the non-Muslim society and Muslims who did not follow their ideas. In contrast, the networks of Pierre Vogel and Die Wahre Religion remained open and accessible as their understanding of daʿwa made contact with non-believers necessary.

Part V
Conclusion – The Resistance of Activist Daʿwa
Through their opposition to the regulation of Muslims, such as that promoted and implemented by the government and the media, daʿwa activists proposed alternative ways of life and alternative answers to the question 'who am I supposed to be?'. The media have been crucial to the rise of this activism; several actions which were published extensively in the media, have now acquired an iconic status of heroism and steadfastness. The size of the Sharia4Belgium network, in particular, was hugely inflated by all the attention it was given, to such an extent that the network often appeared much larger than it actually was. The media, of course, cannot remain silent about the actions of Sharia4Belgium and other networks, it is their job to report social phenomena. In the Netherlands and Belgium, however, it was the spectacle of Sharia4Belgium that received most of the attention and that also in part
determined the tenor of the attention. The attention of the media was constricted the activists by publishing private details about their lives but also incited them to action, for example, by provoking a reaction against media attention by the activists using their own media channels.

In all three countries the government policies have had a preventive as well as a repressive side. The police intelligence and security services monitored the activists and intervened, for example during the riots in Germany, the Hondius-case in the Netherlands and the riots in Antwerp and Brussels in 2012. In addition, there is also an extensive prevention apparatus. Both prevention and repression work in cooperation with Muslim organizations based upon the idea that it is necessary to build trust, to quickly identify so-called radicals and to intervene if necessary. However, repression and prevention do not always go well together; whilst it can sometimes cause activists to drop out, it can also encourage them to firm up their beliefs and practices. Thus, government policy may restrain the activists but may also provide incentives (and certainly in the case of any appearance of double standards being applied) for the activists to develop their ideology. Also Western military interventions triggered, inspired and mobilized the activists. They accused the West of supporting the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, trying to implement democracy in Muslim countries only to expand their own influence and killing innocent civilians. Furthermore they accused Muslim leaders of being complicit in the interventions.

The Islamic communities reacted strongly against Sharia4Belgium in particular and later also against the Dutch and Belgian fighters in the Syrian Civil War. In their critique some of the Muslim spokesmen tie in (but do not necessarily agree) with government policies and the debates about Islam. This gave the daʿwa activist networks a renewed opportunity to present themselves as the vanguard of 'true' Muslims.

These dilemmas and paradoxes of media, government and the Islamic communities constituted the context in which the activists constantly (re) positioned themselves in relation to the media, government and the Islamic communities. Drawing upon the analysis made in the previous sections, four different, but not mutually exclusive positionings can be distinguished: reject, reverse, accommodate and evade. It was their interpretation of Islam, both in opposition to the governments and Islam debates as well as the creation of an alternative form of self-regulation that gave activists sense and purpose. In some cases this resulted in the creation of a necessary framework and program to say goodbye to a life that some activists regarded as sinful and instead to fashion oneself as a devout Muslim, warrior and supporter of the Muslim community. But the concrete implementation was always dependent upon how they understood the political environment too. The activists tried, both in their daily lives and in their manifestations, to practice enmity towards unbelief and called upon others to do the same. This did not mean that all activists followed the exact same ideology or
belief system, but they did share and form their own ideas about campaigning and appropriated the ideas of others. This is an interactive process of subjectification and of establishing a strong identity, during which the activists give their own interpretation to the framing of particular actions, as an expression of their own individual subjectivity. This means that counter-conduct appears in the guise of different actions, different styles and different meanings, even within a similar practice of resistance.

The departure of large numbers of daʿwa activists to Syria ushered in a major change in the social and political context of the activists and their daʿwa. The government and the media focused even more sharply on the aspect of security, the relationship with other Muslim activists and opinion leaders became even tenser, and especially in the Netherlands, all the actions by the activists resulted in extensive media attention. Where the Dutch fighters in the Syrian Civil War were once portrayed by their opponents as idiots and hooligans, and as a threat to society, the image of the Dutch fighters in the Syrian Civil War disseminated by the daʿwa activist was one of harmony, heroism, sacrifice, devotion and happiness. Notwithstanding that image, several people returned from Syria disillusioned. In terms of counter-conduct, leaving for Syria is an example of people "voting with their feet" against the regulation of the behavior of Muslims in Belgium, the Netherlands or Germany and the most drastic step in the search to find an alternative system of regulation and self-regulation.

The daʿwa activists in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany were very small in number, but they were a constant challenge for media, government and the Islamic communities nevertheless. With their choice of an alternative system of ethical principles governing their own personal lives, protecting and shielding the private sphere against infringement (caused in the activists’ perception by the debate on Islam, media and government action), they resist any ideas about what a good and righteous life is which are imposed upon them by outsiders. Their actions in the public space and the reaction of the government in particular to those actions, rendered visible the tensions that already existed in these societies such as: distrust of the government, Islamophobia, the position of the established Muslim organizations, the position of religion and militant-political forms of religion in the public domain, the idea that freedom of speech for Muslims is limited, international military interventions, and so on. That daʿwa activists constituted an ongoing challenge for the government did not mean, however, that the content of the message was taken seriously by outsiders. Their critique, for example, about Islamophobic trends in the debate on Islam and about the geo-politics of the West, did not lead to any serious reflection on those issues, perhaps partly because their categorization as "radical" distracted society from the content of the message and rendered their activism as something deviant and pathological. However, as media and government action not only limit the daʿwa activists but simultaneously enable them, these agencies do not have full control over daʿwa activist networks and the networks remain a challenge.