Leven als de profeet in Nederland: Over de salafi-beweging en democratie

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English summary

How does the Salafi movement relate to autonomy as a democratic value?

This study investigates how the Salafi movement relates to the democratic core value of autonomy by analyzing the conditions and obstacles involved in dissociation. The Salafi movement is a Sunni reform movement that strives to restore a “pure” form of Islam by means of moral reeducation of the Muslim community, a literal reading of the Koran and hadith, rejection of religious reforms and the imitation of Mohammed and his associates in the early days of Islam. The Salafi movement is a utopian movement that seeks to reorganize the daily life of Muslims according to an idealized conception of the past. Salafists create their own way of life that they deem more satisfying and just, placing it in juxtaposition to a world of immorality, suppression and temptation. Salafists claim that their religious interpretation is the only true Islam. They work to form a moral community of true Muslims and maintain that they are the representatives of the only Islam. The movement has developed in a variety of ways and is primarily characterized by internal polemics, theological disputes and conflicts, despite and thanks to its efforts to achieve religious purity.

The existence of this religious movement that claims to be the sole truth in a liberal-democratic country such as the Netherlands leads to questions regarding the reconcilability of such a movement with democratic principles like freedom of religion and opinion and the freedom of association and resignation – freedoms that protect the autonomy of the individual. The question of how Islam fits in with democracy has become a very topical issue in Western Europe because Muslims have settled in countries like the Netherlands, as a consequence of labor migration and the family reunification and establishment that followed. In the public and political debate about the relationship between Islam and democracy, many consider Islam a religion that essentially does not comprehend values such as citizenship, freedom and openness. Forms of orthodox Islam, which include Salafi Islam, and their relationship with democracy are considered particularly problematic. The Salafi movement is seen as antidemocratic because its teachings allegedly legitimize hate, force and violence and oppress women and those who think differently. There is concern that the Salafi movement could potentially pose a threat to the democratic system because of its antidemocratic and anti-integrative character, which is said to stem from the Salafi dogma and could result in intolerant isolationism, exclusivism and parallelism (the pursuit of sharia-based interpersonal relationships). Aside from the fact that the Salafi movement is viewed as a potential breeding ground for violent radicalization, the nonviolent aspects of the movement are also considered worrisome. There is fear that Muslim enclaves will develop in which democratic rights such as freedom of religion are not recognized, in turn putting the autonomy of the individual at risk.

The possibility of dissociation was taken as an indicator to determine if autonomy as a democratic value is violated in the Salafi movement. This study made the basic assumption that autonomy is a political concept that counts as a democratic core value. From this political concept of autonomy, people must respect political rights (freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, freedom of expression and the right of autonomy for those who think differently), but they do not per se have to embrace autonomy as a personal ideal. Therefore, procedural independence is the first point of departure. Procedural independence is said to exist when someone can make a decision, carry out an action or choose a way of life without fear of force or violence. Along these lines, the manner in which a result or decision is achieved is more
important than the result or the decision itself. A person must willingly subject himself to a disciplining regime. From a politically liberal point of view, he or she has the right to live according to the norms of a society or according to the discipline of a religion, even if these do not support the ideal of personal autonomy. This means that respecting political autonomy and the political rights associated with it is conditional, just as is the case with procedural independence, and authenticity is also key in this. Authenticity means that the influence that leads a person to come to a conviction or carry out an action is considered one's own. In addition to the right of assembly (or forming communities), liberal society offers another fundamental right that unconditionally protects the individual rights of members of communities. This is the right to withdraw, to dissociate.

Nonetheless, this formal right is not sufficient to protect the rights of individuals in communities. The fact that exit opportunities are not implemented does not imply that members willingly consent to their participation. In my research, it is true that I have taken a politically liberal concept of autonomy as a given, but at the same time I have also included this criticism of enlightenment liberalism by examining if the right to dissociate is not only formally available but also realistic. In addition, criticism is formulated on the liberal notion of the independent self, which by definition runs counter to religious authority. The notion of a critical, reflective and authentic self as a condition of autonomy is problematic. It is difficult to know when a person carries out an action or comes to believe or decide something without external influence, and perhaps this is simply impossible. The interrelatedness of a Salafi religious experience with the notion of autonomy has been described, in which there is no simple opposition between an autonomous and subservient self.

In order to analyze how the Salafi community relates to autonomy, both the conditions and the obstacles of exit possibilities have been investigated. This allowed an investigation of the extent to which the autonomy of those involved in the Salafi movement is protected. By including the obstacles in exit possibilities, the shortcoming of a political concept of autonomy was identified. If the exit possibilities are to be realistic, there must be (1) procedural independence, (2) civic competence and (3) no isolation. Civic competence means knowledge of political rights, knowledge of exit possibilities and alternatives and the upholding of these political rights. Dissociation can be formally possible but still unrealistic if the costs of leaving are high.

Obstacles to dissociation come into being and are increased by isolation. Isolation will complicate the exit possibilities when this involves exclusivity of social relationships and implies no access to alternatives and political rights. Dissociation can be dramatic for an individual, in the event of social and psychological dependence, investments made, fear of retaliation (physical and otherwise), fear of loss of reputation and protection and the marginalized position it can lead to. Finally, I investigated which factors contribute to a sustainable participation in groups that make the costs of dissociation even greater. For example, it is possible that a person has built social relationships through his or her involvement that he or she risks losing by dissociating or expressing criticism.

This study deals with dissociation in the broadest sense of the word. It covers both complete rejection of Salafi dogmas and rejection of Islam (apostasy) as well as partial dissociation and letting go of norms, values and rules, or interpreting these in one’s own way. Dissociation is considered partial when parts of the Salafi belief experience are not violated, criticized or rejected. Partial dissociation means that you might still be part of a community, but that at the same time, you make use of political
rights to attempt to transform internal norms and values or practice a personal interpretation of an existing school of thought.

This study is based on intensive anthropological fieldwork that was primarily carried out in and around the As-Soennah Mosque in The Hague; the El-Fourkaan Mosque in Eindhoven; the El Islam Mosque in Roermond, where the Salafi organization Alfeth is active, and at a dozen or so other locations in the Netherlands where the Salafi movement manifests itself. The study includes participatory observation in organizations and surroundings, informal conversations, and interviews with religious leaders and followers. The majority of this fieldwork was performed between December 2007 and September 2008 within the framework of the study *Salafisme in Nederland. Aard, omvang en dreiging* (Salafism in the Netherlands. Nature, Scale and Threat), which was carried out together with Professor Jean Tillie and Sjef van Stiphout of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES), commissioned by the Research and Documentation Center (WODC) and on the request of the Dutch counter-terrorism unit (NCTb). Several interviews were held and observations were made after this period of time.

This study describes both the ideology that the religious leaders proclaim and the daily religious practice of those who are affiliated with the Salafi movement. It provides insight into the Salafi ideology and organizational forms that by and large are dominated by men and the multifaceted practice of primarily female believers. Up until now, research has only concentrated on one of these two aspects. Finally, it deals with the question whose answer is given in public debate without any scientific research to justify it: how does the Salafi movement relate to the democratic value of individual autonomy?

This question is answered by examining the dissociation possibilities on the basis of four themes: organizational forms, religious disciplining, political views and finally participation. If there are possibilities of dissociation with these themes in mind, then autonomy as a democratic value is safeguarded in the Salafi movement.

**Types of organizations: formal translocal organizations and disputed leadership are advantageous to autonomy**

Generally speaking, organizations can have favorable effects on the autonomy of individuals. This is because they can increase civic competence, represent interests and procure resources. In order to accomplish this, they must enter into external collaborations and consider democracy legitimate. When organizations enter into collaborations with their surroundings and do not withdraw into their own circles, they are better equipped to teach political skills and values than when they are entirely isolated and delegitimize the current political system. These skills can become values when an organization works together with other organizations and does not go about recruiting exclusive members. These factors are advantageous to the autonomy of those involved because they increase the opportunities for dissociation. Hierarchical leadership has an undoubtedly negative influence on the autonomy of its participants. In an environment in which obeying the organization’s leaders is expected, deviant behavior or opinions are problematized, limiting the autonomy of those involved in the process. The leadership determines in part the extent to which there can be procedural independence, and the availability of alternative sources of knowledge – two important conditions for dissociation.

The question of whether the Salafi movement meets the above criteria can be answered both affirmatively and negatively. The Salafi movement consists of both organizations and fluid, sometimes temporary, informal networks. It is not demarcated
with definite boundaries. There are informal collaborations with others on all levels, though these are not consistent and can occur to varying degrees. External formal collaborations simply do not exist, and on a formal level, the Salafi movement is isolated from other organizations. On an informal level, it is true that the movement collaborates with other societal organizations, albeit with difficulty. Sometimes, the organizations serve as a bridge to society at large by mediating and offering resources.

The Salafi movement is not centrally run by an elite group or organization. Internal and informal collaboration takes place between religious leaders and organizations, but there is also internal competition and struggle. The religious authority in the Salafi movement is diffuse, pluralist and subject to change. The Internet is used by the movement as a means of religious disciplining, and it is also a place where religious authority is challenged and questioned. In addition, the Internet offers the opportunity to acquire knowledge of alternative mindsets, different religious interpretations, exit possibilities and political rights. The access to alternative knowledge is a condition for exit possibilities and to an extent protects individual autonomy in the process. Organizations and religious leaders do not always stimulate knowledge acquisition from alternative sources; sometimes these are even discouraged or suppressed. Religious leaders attempt to keep the information supply one-sided and to restrict the participants’ use of that information. In and around the organizations, there is very little room for discussion. But outside the influence of the mosque, they are obviously unable to control the use of Internet and other media.

Unlike a community that manifests itself in one place, the organizations and networks conduct themselves in a translocal manner, and the commitment of participants is temporary and multiform. Physical isolation is hardly an issue, if ever. Additionally, all organizational levels feature diversity in ethnic and linguistic background, age, and gender of the participants. Diversity increases access to alternative information channels, which is advantageous for dissociation possibilities. The categorization of the Salafi movement as a sect is problematic, as this ignores the multifaceted production and consumption of religious authority. The forms of organization and participation and the status of the various religious leaders are constantly changing, ambiguous and being renegotiated, which means that there is never uniform commitment, degree of exclusivity and separation that could justify an analytical use of the term “sect.” There is no communal life (such as in utopian societies that Kanter has described) in which the members’ daily activities all take place at one location and are all coordinated from a central power apparatus. Both the environment and the structure of the Salafi movement do not lend themselves to complete isolation. There are competing organizations and networks that to varying degrees remain in contact with the non-Salafi environment, which itself is characterized by change and ambivalence by means of modern developments such as communication and media technology and urbanization. The existence of organizations and the professionalization of the Salafi movement has a paradoxical effect on the conditions of autonomy. Organizations will become more transparent for the outside world, and board members and other officials can be can be called to account in suspected cases of misconduct. Organizations are also better equipped than informal networks to enter into informal and formal collaborations, and it is more difficult for them to isolate themselves. At the same time, their disciplining function will become more professional and extensive, but will not necessarily lead to more unity among the Salafi networks. Informal networks can operate more easily outside the public eye. As a result, internal practices are less transparent and easy to monitor. Potential abuses such as coercion and violence escape external control with more ease.
than is possible in a more formal organizational structure with centralized authority. Informal networks that are based on social relationships can strengthen the bond and increase the price of dissociation.

**Religious disciplining: intolerant perfectionism and tolerant behavior**

The second thematic relationship I researched is the one between religious disciplining and the conditions of and obstacles to exit possibilities. Religious disciplining stems from the principle of *hisba* – commanding good and forbidding wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma‘rufat wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*) – and it can manifest itself in a variety of ways. This study analyzed the relationship between autonomy and moral exclusivity, individualization and the means of religious disciplining. The recognition of moral and religious pluralism is an important condition for a democratic system. At the same time, this implies that a person can believe in recognizable objective moral knowledge or a superior truth. However, this individual cannot act from a normative democratic perspective in such a way as to compromise procedural independence or the political rights of those who think differently. The Salafi movement assumes a superior truth in its interpretation of Islam and presumes a hierarchy of various sources of knowledge. According to Salafists, there is objective moral knowledge and only one correct interpretation of Islam. This is why it is evident that within the Salafi movement, there is no space for moral or religious pluralism, in any case not on an ideological level. As a result, the Salafi movement is at odds with a condition for exit opportunities, namely the availability and knowledge of alternatives. This does not mean that such opportunities are not available, or that Salafists do not know about them. It is crucial that we offer a bit of context here. In practice, Salafists do know about political rights and alternatives, thanks to the availability of knowledge sources such as Internet and education, in the Netherlands and beyond. The notion of religious truth limits exit opportunities, but the context of the Dutch Salafi movement influences those opportunities favorably. The daily life of Salafists is characterized by contradictions. They believe in an unequivocal religious truth but are surround by a pluralist reality. What’s more, the way in which people deal with the rules of behavior is pragmatic, which allows the individual freedom of choice and movement, albeit limited. There is space for this because of the prohibition on judging others and underwritten individual responsibility. Ultimately, a person is responsible for his or her own choices and is only accountable to God. Others cannot force a person, but rather only warn him or her. As a result, there is a quintessential distinction made between God and the believer, and the relationships between believers. Finally, despite this belief in moral exclusivity and superiority, there is a lack of a clearly defined authority of knowledge. Because of the endless internal discussions about the precise meaning of truth and lack of uncontested leadership, there is in practice no unequivocal authority of knowledge, which means that the boundaries of morality are called into question. This means that there is more space for the autonomy of those involved, because it is possible for an individual to interpret moral knowledge for him or herself. Despite the fact that behavior is categorized as either ideologically good or bad, rules in practice are not black-and-white, and compromises are made and justified. Along these lines, choices are not simply between good and bad, but are less good or less bad. Striving for an ideal remains undiminished, though this is practiced and interpreted on an individual basis.

From a liberal point of view, surrendering to an authority (for instance on the basis of a religious, cultural or social norm) is always to the detriment of oneself, and one can then speak of a negative relationship between conformism and religious
individualization. This study reveals that this opposition is not as clear as one might think. On the basis of autonomy, personal responsibility and authenticity, the religious experience of Salafists is shaped from a religious framework, which means that through Islam, a process of individualization can take place. According to Salafists, religious experience is an individual and private matter, though they simultaneously do not deny the existence of religious duty. This value does not only originate from a liberal understanding of freedom, but can also be interpreted as a consequence of God’s sovereignty. In the orthodox view, only God can judge people or lead them to religion – there is no force involved in religious belief. There is no simple binary opposition between conformity/subservience on the one hand and resistance/autonomy on the other. Autonomy and conformity to religious authority are mixed, which means that the subject, the pious individual, is also constructed by subservience and obedience to religious dogma. Agency does not by definition have a negative relationship with religious authority.

Salafists try to rationalize obedience to religious sources and tie it to authenticity. It makes a connection between striving for religious authenticity and the authenticity of oneself. Salafists characterize the practice of Islam as “completely being yourself” and “being authentic.” The choice for conformism is explained as an “authentic” choice for an authentic, pure religion that is stripped of “fake,” “impure” religious and cultural traditions. Among Salafists, there is a strong desire for simultaneous authenticity and subservience to a disciplining regime. Those involved consider the choice for a strict religion an expression of autonomy.

Salafists believe that only Allah can recognize inner faith, and that a person can always turn back to the righteous path. Striving for perfection expresses itself, besides as social control, in an extremely subjectified manner, as a matter between the individual and God. This ideal scenario can lead to problems when it is not lived up to. It gains meaning with notions that are inherent to autonomy, such as sincerity, authenticity and personal responsibility.

Finally, personal responsibility for faith and behavior mean that striving for perfection is more important than da’wa. It is not appropriate to point out the errors of others when one is imperfect oneself. Perfection of personal behavior is the most important project in the Salafi movement. Self-discipline with the goal of achieving perfection and moral recovery is crucial. The utopian movement is one of perfectionists, and committing sins or deviating from faith is seen as a personal failure. In combination with the idea of perfection, this puts believers under pressure, and they might also suffer from feelings of guilt when they fail to measure up to the ideal and dissociate, in part or entirely. This is why believers go looking for the Salafi movement, to feed their moral discipline and achieve moral self-perfection. The Salafi movement conveys the message of purity and clarity but creates some ambivalent practices in the process. Striving for piety contributes to tensions and serves as a reason for believers to distance themselves from the movement, but it is also what draws them to it.

According to sharia, there are punishments (corporal and otherwise) for committing sin, apostasy and not observing Islamic rules. This would suggest formal means of coercion in the Salafi movement and the accompanying intolerance in the face of deviant ideas and behavior. Nonetheless, Salafi religious leaders make it explicitly clear that these punishments may not be implemented in a Dutch context. For Salafists, da’wa and nasiha are the only tolerated means to confront Muslims with their bad behavior and sins, and non-Muslims with their religion. They believe that
one can only be tried by sharia judges in an Islamic state, but this does not mean that they will ever approve of deeds that are forbidden according to Islam.

In the worldwide Salafi movement, declaring a Muslim an unbeliever (performing takfir) is an important theme that has led to internal discussions and conflicts. The debate about takfir is interesting because it often serves as a crucial part in the justification of the use of violence. Salafi networks differ from one another on the definition, interpretation and scope of conditions for excommunication. In recent years, the Salafists from the networks dealt with in this study have profiled themselves as non-extremist and moderate. In their rhetoric of moderation, they especially distinguish themselves from groups that profile themselves in some way on the subject of takfir. They contend that takfir is a subject that should be reserved for scholars and Islamic states, not for “average” Muslims. A far-reaching consequence of denunciation is that a Muslim can be sentenced to death, or that violence against a person can be seen as justified, but Salafists in the Netherlands state emphatically that such punishments can only be carried out by Islamic judges in an Islamic state.

In its striving for perfection and discipline, the Salafi movement does not legitimize coercion by threats or violence, and coercion in religion is prohibited altogether. That said, warnings of God’s ire and his punishments in this world and the hereafter are used to discipline one another. A threat can only result from this warning when there are sanctions involved, when it generates fear and when this religious interpretation is believed. There is no actual coercion, but there is very strong social control. This expresses itself in the practice of da’wa and nasiha and the pressure to conform. People can speak negatively of an individual who does not embrace the Salafi interpretation, but there are no sanctions besides social exclusion.

On the basis of the above-mentioned points, one can conclude that in the religious disciplining of the Salafi movement, procedural independence exists on an ideological level. The use of violence and coercion is prohibited. In addition, there is knowledge of alternatives and choices, though these are judged negatively because of the belief in moral exclusivity, leading to pressure to conform. Thanks to the context of the Netherlands, differences in interpretation, and individualization, however, the religious practice is ambiguous and pluralistic, which means that alternatives are to some extent available. But the perfection ideal persists. There is knowledge of political rights such as freedom of religion, and there is a call to respect this in the religious disciplining, leading to civic competence. As far as religious disciplining is concerned, the conditions for dissociation are there. Along these lines, the Salafi movement reveals itself to be comparable to orthodox-Christian religious trends in the Netherlands, which assume moral exclusivity and are therefore intolerant on an ideological level. That said, this ideological intolerance does not translate to legitimizing intolerant behavior.

**Political views: autonomy is not violated, but it is also not promoted**

The third theme involves the views of Salafists on politics and democracy in the Netherlands and the relationship with autonomy as a democratic value. For this, I describe their views on democracy, political participation, the ideal of establishing an Islamic state governed by sharia, dealing with critical remarks about Islam, and the use of violence in jihad. These political subjects form important ideological divides between various ways of thinking among Salafists. The differences are rendered insightful on the basis of the model of Wiktorowicz, in which a distinction is made between quietist, political and jihadist Salafists.
First, I investigated which options and attitudes are advantageous in theory for the conditions of an exit option, through which autonomy is preserved. Respect for a democratic system, political participation and politically reacting to critical statements about Islam all serve to benefit civic competence. Submitting to democratic authority means that democracy can be considered legitimate and political rights are respected. One does not play judge or give priority to one’s personal rulebook. Political participation is a passive form of legitimacy. By engaging in discussions and collaborations, political and otherwise, conditions are created in which political and civic skills and values (civic competence) can be learned. Additionally, a political collaboration can strengthen an individual through access to sources of help, dissemination of information and representation of interests, just like organizations can. In a situation of political aloofness, civic competence cannot be learned, which is disadvantageous to exit opportunities. Political aloofness can also mean isolation. The desire to institute sharia and the call for jihad are not beneficial to civic competence, as these fail to respect the political rights of those who think differently and consist of elements of coercion and violence that do not allow for procedural independence. Finally, apolitical and violent reactions to criticism are disadvantageous to civic competence because the first form can imply isolation and the second implies violence that does not respect the political rights of those who think differently and breaks with procedural independence. After establishing what these conditions are, I then looked to see if they are present in the Salafi movement.

Rejecting democracy as a matter of principle rests on the Salafi conviction of Islam’s superiority and the Salafi interpretation of tawhid: Allah is the sole legislator, and everything that deviates from this legislation is viewed as inferior. A person who does not acknowledge this unity of Allah is guilty of shirk, or idolatry. Idolatry is the deification of anything other than the single God. It also involves associating partners with him, and according to the ideology it is the greatest sin that a Muslim can commit. It is not immediately clear what these theological practices imply in practice. Although the principle of tawhid and the banning of shirk are central in the ideologies of all Salafi networks, there are considerable differences in the interpretation and effects of the concept on contemporary political issues, such as the life of a Muslim in a democratic country where Muslims are in the minority, and on political participation. The application of the Salafi principles leads to endless discussions in Salafi circles.

The study looked at what the rejection of democracy as a matter of principle means for a) political participation and b) obedience to democratic authority. From the viewpoint of the autonomy of those involved, it is important that Salafists respect the prevailing political rights and exhibit political involvement by participating. Political participation does not serve as a condition of democracy, but in the case of exit opportunities it is preferable to political distance, for the latter means isolation while the former promotes civic competence. Political participation (such as voting during elections or membership in a political party) calls for a certain level of involvement with the environment. Discussions are entered into with individuals who think differently and civic competence can increase. With political participation, availability to knowledge about alternative ways of thinking, exit opportunities and political rights are more obvious than when person remains entirely aloof. When Salafists participate in political structures, this is beneficial to the conditions of autonomy.

Nevertheless, the degree and form of political participation is an important issue in the Salafi movement, which means that there is considerable diversity in the kinds of involvement. This condition for autonomy is present, to a greater or lesser
extent. It is advantageous for the autonomy of the individual that differences of opinion exist between networks. This provides space for more than one opinion. Although the Salafists in the networks I researched view Islam as superior, in their objectives they respect Dutch political rights because of tactical considerations. They base this on Islamic argumentation. Knowledge about and respect for the political rights that apply are important conditions for exit opportunities (that protect the autonomy of those involved in the Salafi movement). In political Salafi networks, civic competence is developed more than in quietist and jihadist networks.

Quietist and political Salafists respect democratic legislation, the existing political rights in the Netherlands and procedural independence if their political ambitions and views are concerned, but do this because of pragmatic reasons that they discuss with religious arguments. They submit to democratic legislation, legitimizing the democratic system in the process. That said, their attitude towards obedience to democracy is conditional. The question remains as to how this pragmatism will develop further in the future. Will it become a position held for reasons of principle?

Quietist and political Salafists do not strive for the establishment of sharia in the Netherlands, which on certain fronts does not offer autonomy to the individual. The Salafi movement in the Netherlands challenges groups (such as Hizb ut Tahrir, Sharia4Belgium/Holland) that do make this their objective. Sometimes, these groups fail to respect procedural independence in their methods by employing verbal or even physical violence. These undemocratic methods are wholeheartedly rejected within Salafi circles.

The Salafi movement calls for people to respect political rights in the Netherlands and to demand these rights when the rights of Muslims are violated. It also calls for its followers to respond to accusations, insults and acts of violence against Muslims in a nonviolent manner. To accomplish this, they make use of primarily religious means: invocations, patience, rectitude, emigration and isolation. These religious means respect the prevailing political rights in the Netherlands as well as procedural independence, but at the same time they do not promote civic competence. Emigration and isolation are expressions of political distance, while the other means are politically neutral. Only extreme invocations can be so insulting that they put the political rights of those who think differently in danger and break with procedural independence in the process. They can be a form of verbal violence and inspire listeners to cause harm to those who think differently.

The violent jihad does not meet the conditions for exit opportunities. In the context of the Netherlands, the jihad as a violent means to protect, defend and spread Islam is soundly rejected by the quietist and political Salafi leaders. They do this for pragmatic reasons, not reasons based on principle, and they support their position with religious arguments. The Salafi organizations commit to combating the legitimization of violence in many ways. Nonetheless, there are believers in and around the Salafi networks that do sympathize with jihadist ideas, legitimize violence and violate autonomy as a democratic core value in the process.

The Salafi movement respects democratic authority (albeit conditionally), does not seek to institute sharia, reacts nonviolently to critical statements about Islam and does not call its followers to engage in jihad. These are advantageous conditions for exit opportunities and therefore for autonomy. The political aloofness of some Salafists does not by definition break with the conditions of exit opportunities but does not promote these either, for civic competence cannot be learned and isolation can result. The political views of the Dutch Salafi movement are not a threat to autonomy as a democratic value, while jihadists violate autonomy explicitly.
Participation: contradiction, variability and pluriformity are advantageous to autonomy

Finally, this study examined the way in which participation in the Salafi movement takes shape and what that means for autonomy. Strong ties to a movement contribute to sustainable participation. The influence that an organization can have on an individual depends on the extent to which that individual commits himself to it. In the case of a strong tie to the Salafi movement, the costs of dissociation can be increased. Numerous factors can strengthen the connection to a movement: friendships, rituals, ideology and leadership. The construction of a group identity through uniform expression by the group can erect barriers between insiders and outsiders, increasing the costs of dissociation in the process. Exclusivity of social relationships and societal segregation are two forms of isolation that are not beneficial to exit opportunities. Isolation is disadvantageous for the autonomy of the individual because it limits such opportunities. Two important conditions for the existence of exit opportunities are threatened by isolation, namely (1) knowledge of and respect for political rights (civic competence) and (2) knowledge of alternatives and choices. Finally, segregation impedes dissociation because a person can become socially and financially dependent on likeminded people.

When an individual has contacts outside his own circle (for instance at school or in a work environment), he finds himself in a more beneficial environment in which he can learn political values and skills. Getting a general education has a positive influence on the conditions for autonomy, as it is crucial to learn civic competence and a minimal condition for autonomy. It is of particular importance for children whose exit opportunities are under pressure because of socialization, as opposed to voluntary participation. In addition to leading to degrees, education can increase the possibility of finding work, which in turn leads to financial independence. In theory, diversity in participation, inclusivity of social relationships and societal participation are all beneficial conditions for autonomy. Uniformity in participation, exclusivity of social relationships, societal segregation and the construction of a uniform group identity are disadvantageous to autonomy.

Within the framework of an individual’s autonomy, it is important that various Salafi believers and Muslims who think differently remain in contact with one another. The Salafi organizations attract a diverse audience among which levels of involvement and non-commitment with the organizations vary. Participants differ in background and their motivation for participation in the activities that the Salafi organizations offer. That diversity is beneficial to the autonomy of those involved.

At the same time, Salafists invest in a uniform group identity and express this by stressing brotherhood and sisterhood and through their clothing, language and religious practice. The practices of these group symbols are multiform, however, sometimes temporary and subject to change. This means that the group boundaries are unclear, the call for uniformity and segregation is not interpreted as unambiguous, and this call consists of contradictions unto itself. Even if the dividing lines between various Salafi schools of thought are not always clearly demarcated, each Salafi network tries to profile itself as the representative of the only true Islam in relation to other Muslims who have “gone astray.” In addition to ritual behavior, clothing and language, this is also expressed in the labels they give themselves. Self-definition is a powerful means to construct symbolic moral boundaries and to create and reinforce a feeling of community in the process. Self-definitions determine which position Salafists apportion themselves in relation to society and other Muslims. But
distinctive self_DEFINITIONS are controversial, multiform and subject to change in practice. As a result, group boundaries are fluid and there is no clearly defined commitment. This ambiguity increases the exit opportunities of those involved. Indeed, the boundaries between Salafists and non-Salafists are porous. Disagreement and conflicts between Salafi networks can lead to hard boundaries, and furthermore they can lead to barriers for active, sustainable participation.

The strict Salafi teaching that calls for purity in belief, arranges good behavior into categories and answers all questions in a religious manner takes form in a rigid system of religious interpretations. But this belief system carries its own contradictions along with it – in practice, it is implemented and experienced in many different ways, leading to considerable ambiguity. The daily and religious practice of Salafi believers is less black-and-white than one would assume, in a movement that propagates purity and unambiguity. There is no binary opposition between subservience/conformism and autonomy/resistance, but there is a mixture of different ways of dealing with the religious dogmas, allowing for autonomy by appealing to various religious authorities. This can become apparent when Salafists delegitimize traditions that impede their autonomy by appealing to religious sources.

Furthermore, in their practice of the ideal Salafi lifestyle, Salafists walk a tightrope between values and interests, leading to a considerable diversity in this practice. Although believers indicate that they find peace and security in the Salafi religious experience, striving for purity can also pave the way for ambivalence and conflict. Values compete with one another within a single moral framework, and other interests in daily decisions also count. The construction of the perfect moral self, which is favored by the Salafi movement, is surrounded by contradictions, variability and temporality, both ideally and in practice. The purity, unity and moral framework propagated by the Salafi movement result in tensions.

With this, I express my criticism of others who unjustly represent the religious moral frameworks as a coherent and clearly demarcated whole and insufficiently examine the ambivalence, contradiction and ambiguity of the moral frameworks themselves and how they work in practice. On the one hand, Salafists in the Dutch context must make compromises, which makes it difficult to maintain the pure ideal. On the other hand, Salafists must remain in contact with non-Salafi persons in order to practice da_’wa and improve their position in society.

As a result, the influence of involvement in the Salafi movement on relationships with friends, family and male-female relations is not unambiguous. Involvement does not always lead to exclusivity of social relationships and isolation, not even among those who strive for segregation. Contact with people who think differently is unavoidable. Those interactions, alternatives and choices help to promote exit opportunities and the autonomy of participants in the Salafi movement as well.

Salafists attempt to find a happy medium between their religious life and society at large through work and study. Participation in the Salafi movement does not always go hand in hand with societal isolation and segregation, and only a minority aspire to distance from the non-Salafi environment. Within the Salafi movement, there are differences in the circumstances for the autonomy of participants, depending on societal segregation. Often, participation in the Salafi movement is by definition equated with an aspiration for segregation, distance and isolation. It is true that there can be isolationist tendencies, but there are no Muslim enclaves or clearly defined counterculture; intermingling, negotiation and compromise all take place. The discussions and frictions that characterize the Salafi movement allow on the one hand
for diversity and increased autonomy, for through this diversity, participants come in contact with people who think differently, and alternatives in the process. On the other hand, the discussions can sharpen the dividing lines between groups, leading to a rejection of diversity and isolation from those who think differently. Once again, this puts autonomy under pressure.

The level of involvement in the Salafi movement and the extent to which the Salafi lifestyle is practiced can ultimately change as time goes on. Salafists can change their religious interpretation or practice, or even take distance from the Salafi movement entirely. This means that the conditions of exit opportunities are also subject to change. The participation of believers in the Salafi movement is in principle not uniform, unambiguous and long-lasting, and religious practice does not automatically lead to isolation. As far as forms of participation are concerned, this means that the Salafi movement is not by definition disadvantageous to exit opportunities. There is space allowed for the autonomy of the movement’s individual participants.

Sustained research is required to investigate the changes of believers throughout various phases of life and the future of children who grow up in Salafi families. Currently, there is no sign of exclusivity or isolation that limit exit opportunities, because forms of participation are frequently non-binding, diverse, contradictory and temporary and because diversity among participants exists, the boundaries of group identity are broken down, and there is inclusiveness of social relationships and societal participation. It is true that striving for the construction of a group identity and detachment from those who think differently is disadvantageous to exit opportunities, but such efforts lead to an ambiguous practice. In the Salafi movement, there is sufficient space to dissociate, in part or entirely, and to become autonomous in the process. Exit opportunities can come under pressure for two potential groups: children who grow up in a family with a Salafi mother and father who do not go to school or work, and women in informal marriages who are completely isolated from their surroundings. These groups are not in a place where civic competence can be learned, but rather one where procedural independence can be violated and where there is no access to alternatives.

**Conclusion: the Salafi movement does not violate autonomy**

As for the question as to how the Salafi movement relates to the democratic core value of autonomy, I answer as follows:

In present-day Dutch society, the Salafi movement does not violate the democratic core value of autonomy. One can be both a Salafist and autonomous. In the Netherlands, there is procedural independence and knowledge of and respect for political rights (civic competence) in the religious, societal and political ideas, ambitions and practices of the Salafi movement. I emphasize that these conditions apply to the present time, in the Netherlands and not for Salafists who sympathize with jihadist ideas and legitimize violence. The organizational forms, ideas and practices in the Salafi movement do not lend themselves to sustainable and unambiguous participation and clearly demarcated group boundaries, which means that long-lasting violation of the conditions for exit opportunities is not an issue, choices are available and there is no occurrence of isolation. This reduces the costs of dissociating from the Salafi movement. Nonetheless, the autonomy of children in Salafi families who do not go to school or who have not yet started school and women in informal marriages can be put under pressure when they are completely isolated from their surroundings. The Salafi movement does not call for the violation of the
autonomy of women and children, but it also does not stimulate it. Isolation does occur, and occasionally it is self-chosen. At the same time, women can go to the Salafi movement to achieve autonomy from their parents, family members or partners and break with traditions that hinder them. There is simply no one-to-one connection between the Salafi movement and the violation of a woman’s autonomy.

It is important that the beneficial conditions for autonomy are guaranteed so that the Salafi movement does not develop into an antidemocratic movement in the long term. First and foremost, it is essential that the media and politicians watch out for the careless use of the term Salafist as a label that would cause people to see Salafism as a single unit. Both the ideology and the practices in the Salafi movement are variable, heterogeneous and contradictory. This is beneficial to the autonomy of those involved as well as relations with those who think differently. But when the movement is presented as a single unit, one gets the impression that there are clearly demarcated group boundaries. In addition, it is unadvisable to judge the Salafi movement and enact policy only on the bases of certain ideological Salafi positions. This not only threatens the division between church and state by allowing government to get involved in religious content, but more importantly, the practices, the internal social relationships and the relationships with the outside world are decisive in the manifestation of the movement and the consequences for autonomy as a democratic value. These relationships are currently variable, multiform and contradictory, and that is good news for democracy.

To guarantee the beneficial conditions, it is also crucial that the Salafi movement and its participants do not remain or end up in isolation. Limiting measures (think of a ban on burkas or headscarves) can facilitate isolation, even if these measures intend to bring about participation or promotion of democratic values. Disadvantageous conditions such as isolation and the legitimization of violence can be avoided by not isolating Salafists from society. Acts that could potentially isolate them include refusing them for a course of study or a job on the basis of their appearance. Potential collaborations with Salafi organizations should not be excluded by definition.

Finally, the Salafi movement must get the space to participate politically, either by participating in debates, in the form of political parties, protest groups or demonstrations. Political participation is beneficial to the protection of autonomy. Above all, frustrations on political ground can lead to legitimization of violence as a political means. It is important that quietist and political networks use their anti-jihadist position to attempt to reach believers who sympathize with jihadist ideas. But this should remain the business of the movement itself, for governmental interference can cause religious leaders to lose their legitimacy and authority. It is a responsibility of the community and its imams, religious leaders, educators, friends and family to discourage the legitimization of violence whenever they should come in contact with it. It is the responsibility of the Dutch democracy to enable societal and political participation for everyone regardless of an individual’s deepest convictions, however undesirable or extreme they might be.