Can the ‘muhajir’ speak? European Syria fighters and the digital un/making of home

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RADICALIZATION IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS
RADICALIZATION IN BELGIUM AND THE NETHERLANDS

Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security

Nadia Fadil
Martijn de Koning
Francesco Ragazzi
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Chapter 9

CAN THE ‘MUHAJIR’ SPEAK? EUROPEAN SYRIA FIGHTERS AND THE DIGITAL UN/MAKING OF HOME

Jaafar Alloul

In May 2014, a man calling himself Abu Fulaan from Antwerp posted a video on YouTube explicitly addressing his audience as drari, Maghrebi Arabic vernacular (Darija) for ‘brothers’. In his talk, Abu Fulaan is clearly concerned with presenting life after emigration as good, if not better than (staying put at home) in Europe. Driving his car somewhere in northern Syria, and filming himself with his dash camera, he claims repeatedly in Dutch that ‘life is very normal here’, adding that ‘in some cases we’re even better off than you guys in Belgium’. Fulaan’s aversion for the institutional order of things in Europe comes to the fore when he refers to Belgian political parties, which are usually deemed sympathetic to minority concerns, but by whom he seems to feel betrayed, as follows:

Sp.A [socialist party] and Groen [green party], it’s all bullshit! It’s all the same. Vlaams Blok! [far-right party] They are the least troublesome of all those democrats over there [Belgium]. Why? Because they say it out loud: All makkakken’ out. Muslims shouldn’t be here.

Fulaan then even urges his social group, that is, Belgian-Moroccans, to reconsider their supposedly docile voting habits: ‘There are many people who say that if we don’t vote the extreme right will win the elections and we will be the victims of that, and therefore we should all vote left-wing parties. . . . Those politicians for whom most Moroccans . . . most Muslims, vote – they do vote indeed – have never solved anything for us Muslims’. To outside observers, it is striking that although Abu Fulaan is based in war-torn Syria, he focuses primarily on Belgium, fulminating, ‘I have followed the [Flemish] news, and ‘in a few days there will be elections, so people are urging each other to go vote.’ These utterings clearly indicate an ongoing emotional investment in the home country, as well as a desire to politicize life there. For instance, in another of several YouTube episodes, he and his Dutch co-driver, referring to Sharia law, urge youngsters not to go vote and to stage protests simultaneously: ‘Go and hold up pamphlets and distribute flyers in order to raise political awareness.’
The presence of Belgian nationals in Syria first came to the general public’s attention in Flanders during the summer of 2012. Belgium now holds the highest per capita contingent of EU ‘foreign fighters’ in Syria. As of February 2018, the total number of Belgian legal subjects having engaged in migration efforts to Syria ever since 2012 was estimated at 550–600, including both failed attempts and ‘returnees’.

This entire group has been described as comprising a variety of ‘teenagers and tweens, girls as well as boys, sometimes entire families, or mothers with small children’. Also, 75 per cent of the estimated total of 137 Belgian children in Syria was born on site. Of the 413 adult Belgian ‘Syria fighters’ or ‘foreign terrorist fighters’ (FTF) – as they are now dubbed by most agencies of the Belgian government – who managed to reach Syria and Iraq, 80 per cent are young men with a typical age range between twenty and thirty, and three-quarters reportedly ‘joined the Islamic State (ISIS)’. By February 2018, the Dutch FTF group believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq was estimated at 280 nationals, with at least 42 killed on site, 50 returnees, and 140 remaining in the region. For the joint Belgian and Dutch cases for which information is available, unemployment was estimated at 32 per cent for the Belgian cohort and 41 per cent for the Dutch group, with those employed mainly categorized as unskilled workers. Moreover, some estimates suggest that around 80 per cent of the Belgian Syria fighters held a Maghrebi minority background, while at least a disaggregated 41 per cent of the Dutch fighters is reported to have a Moroccan background.

In September 2014, the largest ever terrorism prosecution in Belgian history began. Members of an association named ‘Sharia4Belgium’ and a set of Syria fighters were put on trial, some in absentia. Speculation about the role of Belgian nationals in crimes against humanity committed in Syria has been ongoing, ever since videos surfaced online in mid-2013 in which Belgian ‘fighters’ allegedly filmed their own acts of beheading their Syrian adversaries. Many other European emigrants – muhajirun in their own parlour – also used a variety of social media platforms to record and share their activities in Syria. A French media commentator even remarked on the jubilant editing and publishing process of one such video – in which Belgian national Abdelhamid Abaaoud can be seen driving a pick-up truck in Syria and dragging along the bodies of what he proudly calls the murtad (apostates) – ‘[They] film their jihad, as if it were all a game’. This chapter seeks to uncover the meanings behind the fabrication and distribution of such digital-style performances of European Islamist fighters in the disintegrating state(s) of Syria (and Iraq), aimed at local publics at home in Europe.

These inexpensively assembled (YouTube) videos and staged pictures focus primarily on their own mythical engagement in what they call sham, and later the khilafa (Caliphate), instead of on the Syrian people’s struggles. Indeed, social media posts of profane celebrations of ‘newfound’ material gains in Syria (weapons, cars, villas) appear legion, along with ‘jihadi’ enactments of what has been coined ‘fierce masculinity’ in other case studies on the migration of close-knitted male groups. This somewhat narcissistic and consumerist behaviour of some European muhajirun in Syria is reminiscent of the ‘post-political’ characterization of contemporary society. However, a closer look at some of these online performances suggests that
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Concrete politics might nevertheless be present. Interestingly though, these politics often relate directly to Europe rather than (only) the Middle East. This chapter therefore also gauges how such digital jihadi enactments can be understood and read as practices of romantic-nationalist ‘homemaking’, whereby established notions of belonging, (feeling at) home and citizenship are purportedly destabilized in favour of the mythical trope of an idealized ‘Islamic home’.

Over time, a series of media polemics and public spectacles have arisen in the Flemish and Dutch media on whether or not these are really ‘Our boys in Syria’? Moreover, lawmakers across Europe have sought to strip ‘them’ of their citizenship through new terrorism legislation, thus seeking to redefine the boundaries of the constitutional order and reinforce the cultural form of the ‘punitive turn’.

In sight of this muhajir (migrant) phenomenon to conflict zones and rising security concerns across the EU, some politicians in the Low Countries have started applying the catch phrase ‘act normal or leave’, insinuating that all sorts of agitation and deviance from the part of ‘the people’ – in this case exceptional minorities – should be de-territorialized, and preferably so to an (ancestral) elsewhere (‘homeland’). Yet, one can also detect a degree of unease among policymakers and academics in Europe on how to best ‘define’ EU nationals that have left for Syria: ‘Syria fighters’, ‘Syria travellers’, ‘foreign fighters’, ‘FTF’, or ‘jihadi brides’ (for women)? It is telling that none of these common institutional signifiers imply any reference to Europe, while at least some Europeans in Syria, like Hicham Chaib, have appropriated a nom de guerre that denotes precisely such a spatial connection: ‘Abu Hanifa al-Baljiki [the Belgian]’.

This chapter has three main purposes: (1) to unpack the complex web of coded (Islamic) ideas (hijra, jihad, sham, umma, ikhwaniyya) on which some muhajirun draw and outline how this infers a set of relational societal sensibilities that refer back to Europe; (2) to denaturalize what we pretend to know about ‘jihadi radicalization’ in Western Europe by foregrounding anthropologically some of the narratives of the actors themselves; and (3) to elucidate some of the ways in which the state in Europe has tried to (re)gain control over these ‘anti-citizens’ (e.g. by enacting new terrorism legislation, declaring a state of emergency, stripping of citizenship and discursive framing). In the following section, I first review the dominant ways in which social scientific knowledge has thus far been produced about this deviant public. It will be shown how the analytical concepts of ‘social space’ and ‘home’, as well as the lens of a political anthropology of migration, offer fruitful venues for inquiry. I then offer a brief note on the applied methodology, before presenting my data and research results.

Knowledge production on radicalization

The considerable focus on the mahjar (place of departure in Europe), apparent in the language used by some of the Belgian and Dutch fighters in Syria, earnestly questions key arguments found in the bulk of rapidly emerging radicalization studies, which mostly emphasize (ideological) ‘pull factors’. The latter focus often
leads to methodological individualism (and petite histoire as pathology), and the mystification of explicit and implicit structures that may precede such outward mobility, such as the interplay between ‘social space’ and ‘race’. While much of the literature focalizes on the transgressive ideology of such agents, it neglects the context of departure and specific inter-group dynamics at play therein. Some scholars have attempted to address this lacuna, but mostly from within the framework of ‘radicalization’ or ‘terrorism’. Although these two strands of enquiry have been considered in recent years, a genealogical tendency to downplay the local context and prioritize ‘international jihadism’ remains salient. For instance, in his recent edition on Syria fighters, Patrick Loobuyck puts forth a disquieting scientific reductionism, which the saturated radicalization paradigm now legitimatizes:

We don’t focus on the societal context of poverty, unemployment, disadvantage, discrimination, Islamophobia, equal opportunities, far right [politics], racism and (failed) integration. This does not imply that a debate on these subjects is unimportant; the contrary is true and it is a pity that we need Syria fighters to do so as a matter of speech. But we nevertheless do not treat these topics here in this study, because they do not have particular relevance to better understand Syria fighters, radicalization and the attraction of IS.

While some scholars frame the muhajirun’s behaviour as ‘nihilist’, others mention the attraction to ‘conspiracy theories’. Both appreciations risk briskly depoliticizing these EU citizens’ migratory agency and the very spaces, or ‘power-geometries’, through which they move, irrespective of their mode of alienation or sense of paranoid phantasm. Media scholarship either harbours similar ideological premises or gets bogged down in the substantial work that comes with more quantitative analyses. Still others have mostly attended to synthesizing governmental data, while staying largely within the analytical confines of ‘integration’. Few have drawn qualitatively on the direct empirical study of such online data as the discursive registers – or ethnographic artefacts – of a mobile but local contestation of societal power in Europe. Anthropologists have only recently started exploring European female migrants in Syria (muhajirat sham) from such an everyday analytic while applying online methods.

Although the Islamic notion of jihad and numerous mujahidin have enjoyed considerable attention in social science, the Islamic concept of hijra (piety migration) remains much less investigated. Yet, one of the claims put forward here is that it is precisely this critical ‘Islamic’ notion that commands attention for the conducive context of departure in Europe. Once unpacked, this mobilizing topos serves as a cognitive bridge in linking strands of contemporary Islamic vernacular to broader phenomena such as alienation and specific modes of spatial-urban aversion and indignation, which are social, if not existential as well. In fact, hijra speaks of the unimaginable: leaving wealthy Europe for war-torn Syria because of a negative place attachment in the West. In their own right, scholars of Islamic studies have already connected such underlying semantic registers as hijra, and
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dar al-harb (‘the house of war’, meaning territory outside Muslim rule), to a variety of historical and jurisprudential debates within the Islamic tradition on the prescription of jihad as either an individual (fard ‘ayn) or communal responsibility (fard kifaya), while noting simultaneously dynamic shifts in the ideational spheres of global(izing) Islam(s). Indeed, the verbal Arabic root of hijra often features in the Qur’an in concurrence with that of jihad. However, hijra also inherently references social space. After all, its Arabic meaning literally oscillates between ‘forced migration’, ‘to break away from’ and ‘render(ed) homeless’, encompassing the coatings of structure, instances of agency and a temporal and uprooted state of liminal being. The contemporary mobilization of hijra as a politicized category may therefore signal how a set of lived experiences of socio-spatial friction have in turn enabled romantic imaginaries of land (sham) and community to take shape. Adopting this angle, ‘Islamist’ notions such as hijra, jihad or sham suddenly appear to us as very modernist epistemic classifications.

In this sense, the muhajir, as an un-theorized ‘mobile figure’, thus also embodies the increasingly politicized emotion of ‘home’ in Europe, or what Jan Willem Duyvendak calls the ‘crisis of home’: heightened social and political concerns for ethno-national belonging and organization. Intriguingly, and contrary to what has thus far appeared in social science literature, Duyvendak approaches ‘home’ as an emotional experience and interactional disposition rather than as a mere physical structure or purely individual sentiment. This then invites us to reflect more profoundly on the uneven experience of what Henri Lefebvre theorized earlier as ‘social space’ and the ‘triple dialectic’, that is, the meeting point of situational political economy (materiality) and cultural forms (layered, ideological normativities), reified as actual social environments by the occurrence of everyday interactions. Indeed, ‘space’ is not a mere passive background to social relations; rather, space is fundamentally social because material context, ideological regimes and everyday social interactions are all mutually constitutive, functioning as a triad or ‘socio-spatial dialectic’. My reading of the notion of hijra also resonates with debates on the validity of the critique of ‘racial capitalism’ and its implications for a ‘politics of recognition’. Although racialized majority–minority dynamics in Europe have been studied in relation to Muslim publics, few have approached it from the dynamic case-perspective of emigration. Indeed, while studies exist about the impact of ‘multicultural’ immigration on formations of ‘race’ in the West, rare are those that focus on the impact that ‘race’ has on emigration, that is, as a powerful structure in itself, informing social experience and capable of spurring all sorts of new (individualized) ‘migratory dispositions’.

Mainstream social science research in Western Europe still considers ‘race’ to be a predominantly American issue and therefore an analytic relevant chiefly to US scholarship. Ignored thereby are the basic premises of racial formation theory, such as racial categorizations being dynamic throughout time (and space), in what remains a societal power play between (established) groups (and newcomers) over capital resources and political domination. This ontic and epistemic inertia has become manifest recently in that it is first and foremost US scholars who initiated the significant question, ‘Is Islam in Western Europe like race in the United States?’
A small and pioneering number of European scholars have recently sought to address this racial optic trans-historically by positing Islamophobia as ‘the new Western racism’, flowing out of an older Euro-colonial racism and continental anti-Semitism. Yet, this overall reluctance of taking race seriously as a meaningful category of analysis might stem from the ongoing rescaling of ‘methodological nationalism’, fixated on all sorts of immigration to ‘Fortress Europe’.

The following question arises from this critical framework: does hijra as a coded form of emigration constitute a spatially contextual and highly symbolic form of minoritarian ‘exit’ in Europe, one which paradoxically reflects a sense of migratory ‘hope’, as a modern ‘imaginary of mobility’?

Methodology: Complementary practices of looking

Scholars have come to note a general ‘lack of primary data’ in most studies on Islamist radicalization in Europe. Indeed, while governments limit sharing their sensitive information, social media platforms and companies like YouTube and Facebook are known to erase ‘hate speech’, nullifying considerable empirical evidence and leaving the public only with impressions. Others have nevertheless noted that, unlike the crises in Bahrain or Yemen, ‘Syria is probably the most “socially mediated” conflict in modern history’, foregrounding the growing importance of ‘online fields’ when physical access is restricted. In an attempt to redress this dearth of primary data, this chapter draws on a preliminary sample of videos and pictures that surfaced online, or were sometimes reported on (and stored temporarily) by media outlets, in the early war context of 2012–2014, when European Islamist activists and fighters in Syria were still actively disseminating their self-portrayals. In total, twelve open-source video samples (of anything between one and thirteen minutes) from mainly Dutch-speaking Belgian and Dutch (Maghrebi) nationals, and approximately twenty images were located online, featuring predominantly young men, of which only a portion could be discussed here.

While quantitative research has been conducted on some of the formal propaganda channels of organizations like ISIS, such as the English-language Dabiq magazine, or the Twitter and Facebook accounts of vocal figures (in the West) calling for jihad in Syria, this study draws on self-fabricated materials by Europeans in Syria, as well as on secondary ISIS propaganda segments that specifically feature EU nationals. In doing so, it seeks to move the analytical perspective primarily to the protagonists and their own discourses about leaving Europe, seeking to address the question, ‘For what and for whom is all this going on, and – indeed – against whom?’

This digital anthropology applied an open-source methodology, employing both direct and indirect data collections. First, open access e-platforms like YouTube were skimmed manually by applying focused search variables, and then other materials (e.g. videos, pictures) were gathered from residual websites, public social media platforms and online media channels that have all reported on and
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stored such primary data. The overall aim was to isolate these primary materials from any secondary framing so as to explore more directly the perspectives of those engaging in hijra to Syria. I do not claim this sample is representative for any (national) group of European muhajirun, nor does this chapter provide an exhaustive causal explanation of this complex phenomenon – leaving this to scholars better positioned. Rather, I approach the theme through a body of literature that is seldom integrated during academic discussions of Islamist radicalization in Europe. Given the relative absence of similar studies that foreground e-data outside of the framework of radicalization, complementary insights on this muhajir public can be attained here, not least by first provoking the Spivakian question, ‘Can the muhajir speak?’ and then carefully listening to what people say regarding where and when they feel at home, and what feeling at home means to them.

Discussion: Jihadi ego in new media

Speaking back to ‘home’ in Europe

A video featured online on the webpage of a Belgian daily newspaper in October 2013 and saw a Flemish-Maghrebi youth (see Figure 9.1) slander the Belgian population from abroad as ‘the descendants of apes and swines’, claiming that Belgium was ‘fighting Islam with laws’ by means of ‘a ban on veils in the schools’. Despite the ISIS flag in the background, he was referencing local municipal politics in Belgium, dating from the late 2000s, namely when the city of Antwerp (led by the socialist mayor Janssens) decided to outlaw headscarves among civil servants in 2007. In 2009, a regional measure was also adopted in the Flemish public-school system, allowing for the prohibition of all displays of religious signs in schools, as an extension of the bureaucratic sartorial legislation. References to such public discussions on the veil ban back in the Low Countries were also made in Abu Fulaan’s first episode on YouTube:

a woman who dresses up gets a fine, while a woman who undresses gets money for it. Yes! . . . The freedom of expression! For us there is no freedom. For us there is dictatorship; using a steel fist against Muslims, that is what we have experienced in Europe, guys.

Here, Fulaan frames such legislative initiatives in the Low Countries as efforts that sought to limit the freedom of religion. Contrary to what one would expect from someone engaged in the Syrian civil war, he chooses to emphasize the claim that his social group has experienced a lack of ‘freedom’ in Europe. We can read in Fulaan’s outcry a sense of racialized exclusion and suppression (‘steel fist against Muslims’). His narrative appears to stand in opposition to what he perceives as a top-down ‘technology’ of state (bio)power. Here, the muhajir’s rhetoric could be seen to function as an oppositional ‘technique’ that seeks to undermine the moral authority of the state in Europe.
Besides such political controversies, some fighters also share rather banal details of their daily practices in Syria. Abu Fulaan, for instance, occasionally mentions some leisurely routines that seemingly fall outside of any concrete politics: ‘I’ll be driving to the shop later on to buy some crisps, some drinks, Pepsi and stuff; that’s all available here’. However, these mundane references nevertheless allude to a concrete urban space and minority milieu in Europe. What Fulaan does here is to tap into a Dutch-Darija vernacular language and introduce subtly a sense of familiarity or ‘home’ that appeals directly to an urban youth culture in Europe.

Hence, his popular ‘urban language’ functions as an emotive layer within the assemblage of his propaganda effort, rather than outside or alongside it. By infusing his message with familiar social codes, such as consuming snacks with close friends, he first portrays himself as an in-group member, establishing credibility and trust, and only then continues to project his ideology. By inserting recognizable elements of daily life in Europe into a larger account of (the war in) Syria, he reshapes the idea of travelling to Syria into something more conceivable; as a groomer, he leads the imagination by example. Such an emigration might otherwise appear alien or distant to European minority youths, as the intricacies of Middle Eastern politics are not familiar per se to second- and third-generation Maghrebis, born and raised in Europe. By blending the wider political concerns of minority publics in Europe, like the veil ban, with more banal rites located in the urban everyday of minority youths, Fulaan crafts meanings into the Syria conflict, offering a palatable ‘translation’. Such highly emotional amalgamations help to make recruitment efforts echo more widely among alienated publics in Europe.

Figure 9.1 Anonymous Belgian in Syria. Screenshot caption: ‘We left everything behind: our family and friends.’

In his recent work, *Migration and the Search for Home*, Boccagni argues that a combined sense of security, familiarity, and control constitute the three key elements in the social experience (of feeling at) ‘home’. Fulaan’s negative perception of ‘anti-Muslim’ legislation takes the form of a dialogical resentment that testifies to a perceived loss of security for his specific (piety) group(s). It also conveys an inability, namely the perceived lack of a political means to exert a degree of control over contemporary forms of exclusion. Listening to these men’s voices when they speak online, one notices a strong ventilation of anger for having gone through some kind of deep-seated, denigrating treatment in Europe – a sort of casting out. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas describes such negative boundary making, or ‘abjection’, as the processes by which certain bodies in society are marked by the ruling classes as undesirable for the purpose of enabling a national ‘Us’ to take shape, precisely by imaginatively emphasizing that which ‘We’ are not.

Moreover, scholars of race studies have suggested that ‘social power plays an important role in how people move in the world and how they connect to place’, reclaiming the Lefebvrian idea that the ability to exert power over space is ultimately power over life. Hence, ‘exiting’ social space, in this case by means of an outward migration to Syria, thus becomes analytically meaningful in attaining a symbolic European ‘voice’ of its own. By ‘leaving Europe’, and advocating for a new community and polity abroad, this ‘migratory voice’ is indeed reified. In this sense, migration-as-process becomes an almost existential means for regaining some degree of (political) control over life. It is therefore argued here that this emigration dynamic to Syria might relate to a deep-running frustration among Muslim minority publics in Western Europe over their abjected social status as second-class citizens, and consequently, to the remaking or revalorization of this degraded social standing through geographical relocation.

In his second YouTube episode, Fulaan introduces a Dutch companion seated next to him in the car, who is brought in to testify on what they claim is by now a collective and transnational political climate across Western Europe:

> I can tell you that left-wing parties like Sp.A and Groen have voted for the ban on headscarves and effectuated it. [The same for] ritual slaughter, a ban; Islamic school, a ban! Those weren’t the right-wing parties; it was all left-wing parties.

In other words, what they claim is that the targeting of Muslim publics in Europe is no longer the sole currency of the (far) right but that it has become part of the broader political landscape. Some Belgian scholars have suggested that it is precisely such a general, post-9/11 societal backdrop – consumed by ‘Islam’ and ‘migration’ – to which contemporary forms of radicalization in Europe can be read: the ‘radical-right anti-Islam stance was now joined by the rigorous anticlerical stance of the left in some kind of joint anti-Islamic Kulturkampf’, thereby cementing a ‘polarizing debate on the compatibility of Islam with Western values’.

In their episode, Fulaan and his Dutch companion first touch upon the situation in Syria. But this evocation of their new ‘home’ remains relatively brief (one minute), marking a ‘discursive silence’; the remaining time (nine minutes) is
dedicated to current media affairs in the Low Countries rather than in Syria. The shift in focus occurs abruptly, hastily transitioning: ‘actually we want to discuss this’. They then relate how two ‘sisters’ were arrested at the Belgian international airport on the suspicion of wanting to leave for Syria. They try to legitimize these _muhajirat_’s attempts by referencing the local societal context in Europe, not least the decades-old racist credo that ‘they’ should leave:

If you’re always shouting, like Filip does [Filip Dewinter, former head of the far-right Flemish Cause party], ‘Adapt or get lost’. Well, those two sisters wanted to leave [Belgium]. They were probably sick and tired of it. But why did they want to leave? They left but they were stopped. Why, I don’t know . . . . people that want to leave _voluntarily_ via official routes are stopped! That’s a world upside down . . . . Those guys [far right], I don’t know what they want. They want us here; they want us there. What are we supposed to do? 

This statement can either be read as incorporating right-wing arguments in order to mock a level of political contradiction at home, or as an illustration of their having fully internalized the racist trope of ‘not belonging’ to Europe. Either way, their mode of speaking occurs in direct _spatial relation_ to the political discourse of the Flemish right wing. Abu Fulaan then asks his anonymous Dutch passenger, ‘I don’t know whether it’s the same at your end?’ To which the latter replies, ‘At our end, they always say that we _have_ to leave. Yes, for the Netherlands it’s exactly the same. Adapt to Dutch society or else you don’t belong here.’ The Dutch phrase that is used to refer to ‘not belonging’ applies the exact wording of ‘or else you are not at home here [anders _hoor je hier niet thuis_]’, in which the key sign of ‘home’ does not merely denote a physical home or even legal citizenship, but clearly connotes belonging to a ‘national’ community based on ethno-racial or assimilationist ideas of collective identity, in their modernist romantic conception. The speakers in Syria thus present their former ‘home’ as an experience of friction, grounded in concrete social geographies in Europe (Flanders, the Netherlands). Their referenced subject position as ‘Muslims’ in Europe imbues the characteristics of ‘racial formation’ processes in which ‘Muslimness’ has gradually started operating as a form of religion-coded race, much in the same way that ‘Catholic’ Irish (and Italian) immigrants to the US were first cast out as ‘non-white’ by the ‘White Anglo-Saxon Protestant’ (WASP) majority in power – a racial disciplining process aimed at limiting their access to meaningful positions of power, thus curbing their quest for permanent settlement and discouraging them from feeling at home. The similarly transformative but contrary dynamic goes for former ‘ghetto Jews’ in Europe, who, over the course of two centuries (1750–1950) became part and parcel of Europe’s cultural avant-garde and integrated into its political and financial elites, only for this ‘Jewish modernity’ to be violently annihilated when ‘they’ were recast as distinct ‘Jews’ during the continental crises of 1930–1945.

By alluding to their past experiences with racism, these _muhajirun_ evoke the idea of ‘home’ in Europe as a well-policed notion to which their community was _not allowed_ to lay claim. Given that most of the cited online media fabrications occur in Dutch, both the symbolism and message do appear located largely within
a *European* social field. Such instances display a political indignation from below, however inconvenient this may sound. Their social media activity signals a need to ‘speak’ (back to ‘home’) – a social privilege often denied to subaltern publics. However, as Robert Young has pointed out, it is not that ‘they’ do not know how to speak (politics), as the above videos partly indicate, ‘but rather that the dominant would not listen’. The tension with which this urge to speak back to Europe from a position in Syria reflects a dual process of un/making ‘home’: in Dutch, rather than formal Arabic, European speakers in Syria address European publics, and discursively intervene on local matters of social and political concern in Europe (‘making’), while at the same time discarding (‘unmaking’) their respective societies as viable social spaces for ‘Muslim’ life, propagating oppositional horizons of being and community. In doing so, they seem to have internalized the very binary of outsider/Fremdbild of the far-right logic.

Indeed, it is striking how the political life-worlds of these *muhajirun* continues to be informed by European sensibilities despite their relocation. As migration scholar Pine makes clear, however, ‘migration is both a future-oriented and a backward-looking process’. In our case, it calls attention to the importance of lived experiences in the space of departure as being indicative of the movement itself: from the alienating urban ghetto in Europe to the Syrian front. Moreover, migration scholars like Ghassan Hage have already demonstrated at length that a sense of ‘stuckedness’ – that is, the subjective feeling of ‘going too slowly’ or ‘going nowhere’ – can play a role in prompting emigration. In such instances, migration operates as a hands-on coping strategy for ‘waithood’, and as a gateway for a set of future aspirations located or imagined in an elsewhere.

In this light, it comes as no surprise that Belgian scholars have started making the claim that ‘all radicalisation is local’. In fact, more alarming analyses also implicate the relevance of the suggested notion of ‘home’, in very concrete ways: judging by the number of plots and attacks hatched by Syrian returnees, the Islamic State’s francophone [French and Belgian] cadre appears to be the most active of the organization’s Western contingent. Often operating together in Syria, a number of these recruits showed an early proclivity towards striking their home country. Indeed, ‘immigrant’ minorities-turned- *muhajirun* might now symbolize how ‘from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master’. This ongoing interplay between ego and superego, both online and in the political sphere, raises the question then whether the ensuing aggression by these *muhajirun* inside Europe symbolizes, to a certain degree, a very reactionary revolt of the ‘colony within’, bearing in mind here the involvement of European citizens in appalling local attacks on European soil who have never themselves ventured out to Syria, like Salah Abdeslam.

**Un/making home: Burning the EU passport**

A particular *muhajir* rite in Syria is the recording of EU passport burnings, accompanied by slogans like, ‘We are honoured that we have nothing more to do with [you]’ in the case of a set of Dutch nationals (see Figure 9.2). Here, the
signifier ‘you’ refers to Dutch society. In part, this type of recorded hyper-media seems manufactured to arouse a non-Syrian, Dutch public. The speaker’s claim of not being part of the ‘u’ evokes an almost bodily understanding of ‘the nation’. During such critical junctures, aversion to the context of departure seems stronger than attraction to Syria or the Middle East. This rite of passage further amplifies the unmaking of ‘home’: subsequent to the burning stage, one passes on to the liminal phase of being stateless and homeless (disaffiliation), after which a combative oath is taken (re-grounding) that clears the way for a reconstitution (re-affiliation) of community (brotherhood/ikhwaniyya, umma) in a new ‘home’ (sham, khilafa). Such emblematic rituals in Syria foster newly found social bondage and self-identification.

A similar act was staged by French nationals in Syria, who in a video post (see Figure 9.3) that was published by the Guardian in 2014 shout out in an enraged tone of recording, ‘You have oppressed us, you have fought our religion, you have insulted our Prophet’. The main speaker adds: ‘If you come here, we will fight you.’ Here, the signifier of ‘you’ denotes France and the symbolic institution of the French army. Citizenship thus also represents the (un)willingness to associate with a state and its society. This French discourse of dissent evokes a desire to engage with France in a geographical space that is framed in highly mythological

**Figure 9.2** Primary image produced by Dutch nationals in Syria and reported on by UK scholar Shiraz Maher on Twitter (September 2014), showing the ritual burning of passports. Screenshot caption: ‘Dutch foreign fighter in Syria burns his passport. His message: “we are honored that we have nothing more to do with u.”’

*Source:* Anonymous 3, retweeted by Dr Shiraz Maher (ICSR, King’s College London) (9 April 2014), [Twitter, account ‘@ShirazMaher’]. Available at https://twitter.com/ShirazMaher (accessed 20 April 2014).
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Sham, founded on the debris of disintegrated states in the Middle East, provides these Europeans with a highly mediated platform from which to voice their power contestation as modern ‘anti-citizens’ on the move. By introducing ethnographically the social figure of the muhajir, and probing his rituals in Syria, I am able to conceptualize here the analytical figure of the ‘anti-citizen,’ which enables for the development of Robin Cohen’s triangulation of citizenship categories. Based on his view that ‘the modern state has sought to differentiate the various people under its sway by including some in the body politic and according them full civic and social rights, while seeking to exclude others from entering this charmed circle,’ he conceptualized ‘citizens’ (e.g. nationals by birth), ‘denizens’ (e.g. cosmopolitan ‘expats’, recognized asylum seekers), and ‘helots’ (e.g. irregular entrants and overstayers, asylum seekers, irregular workers). However, his implicit legalistic focus does not include abjection processes of racialized segments of the citizenry (by birth) that are, subsequent to emigration, downgraded in both their symbolic and legal status, over their political behaviour abroad – either by their own doing (i.e. burning rites) or by authorities in Europe that push for stripping their citizenship status.

There is a well-established discourse in France, and Western Europe for that matter, that propounds that citizens with a non-EU, Muslim background from Maghreb countries are only ‘French in passport’ or ‘français de passeport,’ and can therefore be categorized as ‘second-’, ‘third-’, or ‘fourth-generation immigrants’ or ‘issue de l’immigration,’ irrespective of their place of birth. This amounts to what scholars have dubbed ‘differentialist racism’ or ‘neo-racism.’ Rik Coolsaet has recently highlighted that ‘social exclusion – the feeling of being considered
second-class citizens' constitutes a key element of the conducive context of minority youth's radicalization in Europe, precisely because it operates as a form of relative deprivation. In her study on the experiences of youths of North African origin in France, Nadia Kiwan writes that 'racial and cultural discrimination, in all its forms', is intensely 'present in terms of a conscience' among young men in the banlieues of Paris. In the Low Countries, scholars have over the years also noted an increasing 'culturalization of citizenship', operating under the auspices of the disciplinary discourses of 'integration' and 'tolerance'. The salience of such exclusivist ideologies in Western Europe reinforces the primacy of ethno-national ideas (confer jus sanguinis) and challenges universalist philosophies on state–subject relations that remain as yet enforced by law in most EU Member States (jus soli).

In the French video (Figure 9.3), one of the speakers heatedly utters, 'we disown these passports that you have imposed on us'. Such a claim makes it seem as if a passport is the only thing they share with other segments of French society, suggesting that they have internalized and are now themselves reproducing the racist logic of the European far right, despite having been socialized primarily in Europe. In her work, Barbara Franz has discerned an ongoing 'coloured' (segmented) form of class indignation in Europe, arguing that an underlying negation of social mobility for many West-Europeans with an immigrant-Muslim background has in turn led to a reinforced self-identification as 'Muslims'. In this dialectic process of segregation, dominant notions of otherness (stigma) also feed back into the cultivation of selfhood among besieged minorities.

The muhajirun's narratives, rituals and style performances convey strong negative place attachments to Europe that seem located on a visceral level, based on a series of (traumatic) lived experiences, or 'espace vécu'. Indeed, the fact that they take the time and effort to speak of their prior condition back in Europe in a heated Syrian war context suggests that Europe continues to occupy a central emotional referent in their life-worlds. Their willingness to engage militarily with the European 'nation-state' indicates that their anger and discourse seem fixated against this previously experienced racialized structure, or 'racial space', in Europe. This renders their Islamist discourse on 'home' very political indeed. It appears that forms of local alienation in urban Europe have translated into a spatially aversive affect, to which emigration (hijra) is the answer.

This emerging importance of the European context of departure, unearthed in the online repertoires of European muhajirun in Syria, puts to question the overemphasis on foreign ideologies and political movements abroad, as found in the rapidly emerging bulk of radicalization scholarship. Recent studies seem primarily concerned with diagnosing individual signs of pre-departure 'radicalization', while often outsourcing the main political references to a social space abroad, outside of Europe, namely as 'the attraction of IS'. Yet others displace politics entirely to a sensational cyberspace ('virtual Caliphate'), which allegedly stands disconnected from broader socialization processes. Conveniently so, 'they' then radicalize anywhere but in our midst.

Responding to such a trend, scholars like Franz have long argued for the rehabilitation of social class into the analysis of 'Islamic alienation' in Europe.
a similar vein, more critical explorations into the intricate structure of ‘race’ have posited racism to be an inherent instrument for class division, catering to the ability of capital to flexibly call upon, or temporarily expel labour segments according to the dictate of market demands (social dumping), precisely through their very inferiorization or selective ‘racing’, always recreating new ‘regimes of human worth.’ In this view, racism is not a negligible by-product of modern capitalism but rather an integral function (‘social reproduction’) to sustaining its very survival. Therefore, if capital organizes itself on a racial basis too, as an underlying social relation of production, then ‘race’ forms an integral device in the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the ruling class and its majoritarian following among the population.

For instance, when yet other Belgian and Dutch muhajirun in Syria proclaim, ‘Our Prophet is being mocked, use hikma [righteous wisdom], and stand up’ in direct conjunction with mentioning (Geert) ‘Wilders’ – the Dutch chairman of a far-right party (Partij voor de Vrijheid) – it signifies not only the visceral ways in which ‘Muslims’ experience the persona of the Prophet, but, also that European minority youths have started mobilizing religion (hikma) politically, as a modern vernacular for staging a militant counter-discourse. Most scholars have overlooked the fact that these European muhajirun in Syria repeatedly make such telling references to concrete political figures of the far right in Europe. Consequently, one can argue that new and locally emerging ways of collective self-identification (categories of practice) among highly racialized subjects of the working class need to be tied into the global material intricacies at play within grotesque spectacles of identity politics. As Cohen has amplified, ‘too much attention has been paid to identity formation among ethnic minorities without looking at the shifts in popular consciousness and cultural practices among majority populations.’ Hence, shifting the analytical focus from the ‘individual’ (‘Syria fighter’) or ‘residual’ (‘Muslims’) to the hegemonic and dominant dispositif within the socio-spatial (i.e. re-emerging forms of ethnic nationalism) seems expedient.

Today, the notion of hijra is actively discussed (online), especially in puritan strands of Salafi-Wahhabism in the West. ‘Spokesmen’ have been reinforcing its obligatory and literal-physical interpretation – stressing the binary ‘dar al-harb’ versus ‘dar al-Islam’ as opposed to hijra as intention (niya) and a domain for self-struggle and repentance (tawba). However, it is key to ask ourselves on what societal grounds in Europe this ideational Wahhabi literalism (of ‘reborn’ Muslims rediscovering their faith) is fostered. One could reference the Qur’an and state that ‘they’ act merely upon their religious commands; one particular Qur’anic verse seems to have been popularized in Wahhabi circles, namely when the angels are quoted asking the deceased, ‘In what condition were you?’ They will say, ‘We were oppressed in the land.’ To which the angels will say, ‘Was not the earth of Allah spacious [enough] for you to emigrate therein?’ However, the very popularization of this specific verse (from the entire Qur’an and body of Hadiths) also suggests that ‘they’ link such historical registers of the Islamic tradition (e.g. the oppression of Prophet Mohammad and his ‘hijra al-nabawiyya’ in AD 622) to a contemporary climate of societal polarization in Europe and their own negative place attachments.
Un/making race through hijra to sham

In older video segments that were incorporated in a 2017 Belgian-Flemish documentary series on IS, we can hear French-speaking Belgians in Syria propagate the Caliphate, saying there is no difference between an Arab and a non-Arab, between a white man and a black man, provided that they are pious. This claim is bolstered in their video sketch by an image of men of different colour, all dressed up in identical (‘egalitarian’) army uniforms, all smiling and posing in a brotherly fashion (see Figure 9.4). Another image follows showing young men intensely hugging each other in the mosque after prayer. Racial equality and pious brotherhood (ikhwaniyya) are two ideas that are drawn upon simultaneously to morally legitimate the Caliphate as a political space in opposition to Belgium and Europe. The documentary also featured an anonymous Dutch-speaking Belgian male (see Figure 9.5). Looking into the camera, he proclaims: ‘Thank God for giving us the strength to comply with our duty [hijra, jihad], and as you can see, we are here with all sorts of people: Africans, Europeans, Americans, Asians. And that kind of racism that you know there is simply not around over here.’ He makes this claim while rowing a boat (on the Euphrates, with a child) against the backdrop of a crystal-clear sky. He is then seen lighting a campfire over which fresh food is cooked, enticing the audience with a sense of outdoor adventure. Similar to most of the abovementioned speakers, he narrates in vernacular Dutch to European (in-group) audiences, and in the background one can hear pre-recorded Arabic-language hymns (anasheeds) that have been put in place to further evoke a sense of Arab-Muslim authenticity. By unfolding a discursive opposition between ‘here’ (the Caliphate’s self-proclaimed territories) and ‘there’ (Belgium), he too addresses – as fuel for Wahhabi ISIS propaganda – the contemporary racialization of (coloured) Muslim citizens in Europe.

The documentary then features a video clip dating from August 2014, featuring Hicham Chaib (see Figure 9.6), a former resident of the Belgian city of Antwerp.

Figure 9.4 European IS fabrications. Left: Image of fighters of ‘all colours’ presented as ideal. Screenshot caption: ‘Between an Arab and non-Arab, a white [man] and a black [man].’ Source: Anonymous 6, in ‘Vranckx: IS in het vizier – voor God en Kalifaat’ (21 March 2017), [Canvas online, episode 1], 26:35–27:06. Available at https://www.vrt.be/vrtnu/a-z/is-in-het-vizier/1/is-in-het-vizier-s1a1-voor-god-en-kalifaat/ (accessed 1 April 2017).
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Wearing a turban and ‘traditional’ garb, he emotionally proclaims in Dutch, ‘I have never in my life felt like a Muslim as I do in these moments, over here, amidst all the Muslims, and under the shadow of the *khilafa*. Thank God, we live here very safely and very happily.’ At the time of recording in Raqqa, the day is bright and there are few signs of war. Chaib claims that his ‘happiness’ is derived from concluding *hijra*, evoking the idea of a ‘homecoming’ and immersion into a

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**Figure 9.5** Anonymous Belgian-Maghrebi testifying about the absence of racism in the Caliphate. Screenshot caption: ‘And the sort of racism that you know there is simply not around over here.’


**Figure 9.6** Belgian-Moroccan national Hicham Chaib (August 2014), staging IS propaganda from Raqqa, Syria. Screenshot caption: ‘[I have never in my life felt like a Muslim as I do] in these moments, over here, amidst all the Muslims.’

reachable Muslim ‘body’, as some form of kinship, drawing on the pre-national notion of the global umma, the ecumenical Islamic community. His reductionist parole of equating diversely inhabited territories in Syria to ‘Muslims’, only makes sense when attending to its reflexive referent: the feeling of not belonging to/in Europe, propagated, or indeed previously experienced, as being equally ‘homogenous’. Chaib crafts a migratory horizon where sham operates as a ‘promised land’, portrayed as a gateway towards a more dignified life among alleged brethren. Although the signifier of ‘Muslim’ remains applied in terms of ‘situational self-identification’ across space – he self-portrays primarily as ‘Muslim’, first in Europe, then in Syria – its connoted meaning nevertheless holds a wholly different weight subsequent to emigration: majoritarian dominance. Spatial relocation across social formations can thus be imagined or experienced as a beneficial form of (racial) status exchange, and is hereby conceptualized as the process of ‘status migration’, as a contribution to migration scholarship. In Chaib’s case, his own status exchange seems to have come with a concrete pathway to power in Syria, as he reportedly occupied a position in the ranks of the ‘religious police’ in Raqqa. In fact, other muhajirun in Syria, like Abu Fulaan, also celebrated this peculiar inversion of power: ‘In Syria, we are the police!’

Drawing on colonial history, Cohen was quick to point out that it used to be ‘perfectly possible for English and Irish convicts to become landowners and gentlemen farmers in Australia’, demonstrating that a drive for upward mobility in the social order has long functioned as an emigration motive, especially for symbolically stained publics that would otherwise remain ‘stuck’ in their abjected social position. This chapter proposes, however, that such instances of ‘status migration’ need not be narrowed down economically to labour or mere gains in monetary income, but can simultaneously involve matters of ‘race’ too. The idea of ‘hope’ for an alternative social ordering through migration comes to the fore here. One should note also that Chaib does not evoke ‘Arabness’ in his discourse on community, amplifying the demise of regional Arab nationalism as a mobilizing political force. The militant Wahhabism of European IS-supporters like Chaib and their obsession with the ancient world seems to have blended with the ideational categories of nineteenth-century European racism, approaching therein the discursive structure of the contemporary far right in Europe. This ‘glocal’ style-embodiment exhibits how certain ideational frameworks can travel, blend with others and re-emerge as hybrid assemblages outside of their foundational sphere of origin.

By coding Syria as sham and ‘among Muslims’, and infusing mythological monotheist sentiments like ‘salvation’, a ‘new beginning’, or a ‘resurrection’ (nahda in Arabic) into imagined notions of communitarian space abroad, we see Chaib romantically framing his migration as a transition from membership of an urban outcast minority to a majority Herrenvolk. While showcasing subtly his new position in the social hierarchy, the sign of ‘Muslim’ in Chaib’s narrative implies, however, an equally racialized conceptualization. His take on sham and the khilafa has taken on the form of a Lacanian ‘fantasy-space’, in which he and his IS affiliates are positioned centre stage as a ‘chosen people’, surrounded by object-like
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others – framed as ‘pagan intruders’, ‘non-people’, or ‘rejectionist apostates’ (kuffar, tawaghit, murtad, rafidin) – whose very existence defies the propagated myth. These ideational exponents of his language use – romantic terra, default ‘nation’ in Europe’s mirror image – partly highlight the reproduction of European social space in Syria. As Neely and Samura have aptly pointed out, ‘the making and remaking of space is also about the making and remaking of race’.128 This also resonates with Spivak’s critique of ‘colonized minds’: subalterns ending up reproducing the very ‘Western fantasies’ of their (former) ‘masters’.129 These young men seem to produce the stereotypical image of the antithetical Orient that has so long been propagated by the centres of Empire, prompting the question of whether their styling efforts, in all their disconnect from the many concrete struggles of the Syrian peoples, present us paradoxically with yet another Fanonian permutation of ‘brown skin, white masks’.130 Indeed, Chaib’s narrative strikes us as an extremely dualist, centre-periphery discourse and demonstrates the modernist racialism at the heart of IS’s ideology. His language points yet again to the importance of Boccagni’s aforementioned element of (re/gaining a sense of) control over life; in this case, by violently remaking Syria as a cleansed ‘Muslim home’. Performing hijra to Syria-as-sham appears to constitute a highly relational quest for community and belonging, masking modes of individual alienation and racialized abjection in Europe. This indignant procession of self-exile then becomes a late-modern phenomenon, occurring to a certain degree in a dialectic relationship to forms of exacerbated nationalism and racist exclusion by majoritarian publics in the West. This suggests that fringe elements of an oppositional minority politics have morphed into a far-right modus operandi, transposed abroad (on) to the Syrian conflict;131 as radical elements that might otherwise have served as fuel for a progressive social movement at home in the face of wide-ranging, dislocating social transformations in Europe.

Conclusion

Migration scholars Narotzky and Besnier rightly remind us that ‘past experiences provide a horizon of expectations configuring present aspirations and hopes for the future’.132 Indeed, space and spatially situational behaviour are, at least in part, social products. However, when it comes to the study of the phenomenon of ‘Syria fighters’, the societal context of departure has generally been ignored in favour of the ideology of ‘international jihadism’, obfuscating some of the more structural psychosocial modalities that may partly inform such a peculiar emigration in the first place. By means of carefully studying the online narratives of some of the more vocal muhajirun in Syria and Iraq, this study has unearthed a strong focus on Europe (despite their emigration), as well as a relational language that articulates highly racialized experiences as ‘Muslims’ in their respective societies of departure. This discursive focus on ‘home’ in Europe is clearly political, for it speaks of a viscerally experienced abjection as second-class citizens. In fact, some of the recorded jihadi (body) language used in Syria seems to occur in Dutch rather than
formal Arabic, and it often stands in a dialogical relationship to European rather than Middle Eastern societal affairs. In particular, these muhajirun can be seen interpelling the racist discourse of the European far right, applying such ‘antithetical’ political referents to make resonate further their (IS) propaganda among other minority youths in their home countries back in Europe. These elements run against the mainstream assertion that these ‘Syria fighters’ are somehow foreign to our societies in Europe.

Focusing on what is said about the home context of departure in the online narratives of some West European ‘Syria fighters’ suggests that the pervasiveness of ‘racial space’ in Europe might have partly provided a basis for spurring such migratory dispositions. This ‘voice of exit’ comes about through discursive references to a lived status degradation in Europe, and through visceral rites of un/making ‘home’ in Syria, like ritual passport burnings that first abort and then renew community abroad. To a certain extent, migration to sham could be seen as a globalized form of rebellious hyper-locality: a numerically small minority technique that seems aimed at subverting a European nationalist governmentality that is claimed to premeditate the inferior status of specifically ‘Muslim’ life forms in the social order. In their case, outward migration then appears to function as both a means to navigate, hampering racial stigma in Europe, and as an imagined pathway to attaining increased material privilege, social standing and even dominance abroad; a spatial process of radical status exchange that I have coined here as ‘status migration’.

Moreover, in undertaking hijra to Syria (and affiliating often with such groups as IS), muhajirun from the Low Countries seem to reproduce the ideational tenets of a lived European racism, on the rise since 9/11. This is clear from their highly selective, particularly narrow, and ultimately modernist appropriation of a series of Islamic notions (hijra, jihad, sham, khilafa, umma, etc.) that are preoccupied with demographic homogeneity, ancient myths of land and political demagoguery. Consequently, it could be argued that such European (minority) youths on the move have cultivated a far-right wing political extremism of their own, coded in ‘Islamic’ vernacular yet occurring in dialogic relation to the racist nationalism of majoritarian far-right groups in Europe. These ‘Islamists’, born and socialized in Europe, thus partly transpose and reproduce a highly racialized European social space’ in Syria, possibly reinstating and multiplying modes of injustice on site. Instead of struggling politically in Europe to ameliorate their outcast condition, minority trajectories of lived exclusion seem to have been displaced abroad, in a propagated fantasy-space like the Caliphate, which legitimizes inverted cycles of quick-fix dominance and new modes of dislocating violence, and even ethnic cleansing.

Today this muhajir public is disowned by the state in Europe through both ideological naming efforts that cast them out as allegedly foreign to the national body (e.g. ‘Syria fighter’, ‘foreign terrorist fighter’/FTF, ‘jihadi bride’), as well as the stripping of their citizenship without much judicial supervision (in the early phase of this phenomenon). In turn, their (online) threats and highly mediated societal role seem to expedite a gradual redefinition of state–citizen relations that altogether reimagine constitutional boundaries. Surely, some muhajirun returning from Syria
with military know-how will continue to pose a threat to society in Europe, as shown by the abhorrent attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), raising a whole series of further questions on prevention and monitoring mechanisms. But what is less mentioned is that they, as Belgian and Dutch IS affiliates, also provide the fuel for the public legitimation of costly and long-term ‘perpetual’ warfare of various EU Member States in Middle Eastern countries like Syria and Iraq. As such, this specific *muhajir* public has moved from the functional character of being a principle Other *within* Europe to what I see as ‘anti-citizens’ *on the move*, serving as a welcome nemesis in the teleological crafting of a more militarized European national self-image. The social figure of the *muhajir*, willingly performing the role of the jihadi anti-citizen and potentially fulfilling its reactionary credentials abroad, thus helps facilitate gradually this *normative shift* in societal governance in Europe, away from preventive redistribution and curative recognition in favour of a more punitive security turn.

**Notes**

1. Mimicking the critical sketches of Belgian-Moroccan comedian and Facebook-hit Rachid Abourig.
3. Flemish-Dutch slang and racist sign, translatable as ‘shitty monkeys’, referring to both a type of ape (*makaak*) while denoting simultaneously the Dutch signifier of ‘*kak*’ or ‘*shit*’.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
10. Renard and Coolsaet, ‘From the Kingdom to the Caliphate and Back’, p. 19.
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14 Ayfer Erkul, Maud Oeyen and Koen Vidal, ‘Syriëstrijders begaan oorlogsmisdaden’, De Morgen, 8 June 2013.


18 A historical endonym denoting the most populous and fertile areas of the northwestern rim of the Middle East, known as the Levant or Bilad al-Sham (Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Southern Turkey), featuring as a mythological region in Islamic eschatology (e.g. ‘Great battle of the final hour’/Al-Malhama al-Kubra).


23 David Garland, The Culture of Control.

24 De Morgen, ‘Burgemeester Rotterdam: “Als het je hier niet bevalt, rot dan op”’, 8 May 2015. Also, in January 2015, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte used the catch phrase ‘pleur op’ or ‘piss off’, mimicked in Belgium by Gwendolyn Rutten.


30 Sageman, Understanding Terror Networks.


36 Bakker and De Bont, ‘Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters’.


38 Mobilizing discourses (pull factors) from religious figures in the Middle East remain relevant given that they are read as *political* rhetoric. For instance, on 13 June 2013, a joint statement was issued in Cairo by a number of Sunni clerics declaring ‘jihad’ in Syria as ‘*wajib*’ (obligatory), in order ‘to help our brothers in Syria by sending them money and weapons’ (*Al Arabiya*, 2013). It featured prominent, *state-affiliated* clerics like Saudi preacher Abdulaziz al-Shaikh, Youssef al-Qaradawi, the prolific Egyptian preacher based in Qatar, and Hassan al-Shafai, a senior cleric of the Al-Azhar academy. This event coincided with the first military victory of the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah movement in Syria, namely the strategic capture of the city of Al-Qusayr in early June 2013. These regional political dimensions shed further light on the precise timing (summer 2013) by which militant ‘Islamist foreigners’ influenced by Wahhabi ideology, both in Europe and elsewhere, decided to leave their home countries and travel to Syria in particular (and not to Bahrain, for example).


43 See, for instance, Qur’an 8: 72.


62 Carter, Maher and Neumann, ‘#Greenbirds’, pp. 1–32.


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77 Fulaan, ‘Bear Grills’, ep. 3.
78 Ibid.
80 Omi and Winant, Racial Formation in the United States.
82 Traverso, The End of Jewish Modernity, pp. 7–19.
88 Coolsaet, ‘All Radicalisation is Local’.
92 Anonymous 3, retweeted by Dr Shiraz Maher (ICSR, King’s College London) (9 April 2014), [Twitter, account @ShirazMaher]. Available at https://twitter.com/ShirazMaher (accessed 20 April 2014).
93 Anthropologists have noted that Belgian muhajirun in Syria tend to stage a fundamental break with their mothers back in Europe – even denouncing them as apostates in a takfiri fashion that characterizes the Wahhabi strand of modern Islam – signalling other mental thresholds in the ritualistic redefinition of belonging in Syria (see Leman, ‘Van radicaliserend tot jihadistiserend’, pp. 53–54).
95 Edward Soja, Seeking Spatial Justice (Minneapolis, MN, and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
98 Coolsaet, ‘Anticipating the Post-Daesh Landscape’, p. 46.
101 Bowen Paulle and Barak Kalir, ‘The Integration Matrix Reloaded: From Ethnic Fixations to Established versus Outsiders Dynamics in the Netherlands’, Journal of

Anonymous 4, in ‘Video: French ISIS Fighters’.


Lefebvre, The Production of Space.


See, for instance, Marion van San, ‘Onze kinderen zijn geen terroristen’: families van Belgische en Nederlandse Syriëgangers over het vertrek van hun geliefden, Tijdschrift voor Criminologie 57, no. 3 (2015): 308.

See, for instance, Loobuyck, ‘Introduction’, p. 16.


Cohen, Migration and Its Enemies, p. 108.


See Qur’an 4: 97.


Media reports about ethnic cleansing of (e.g. Yazidi and Kurdish) villages in the vicinity of Kobani by IS militants in September 2014 come to mind here.

Cohen, Migration and Its Enemies, p. 102.


Hage, ‘Waiting Out the Crisis’.


Neither is a form of ‘Maghrebi diaspora’ consciousness evoked (e.g. ‘Moroccan’ or even the Amazigh identification, each harbouring its own distinctive politics).
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127 Zizek, quoted in Hage, *White Nation*, p. 98.
131 Abu Fulaan literally urges youngsters to stay away from crime (‘breaking stuff down’), providing them with a political alternative: ‘If you do have the excess energy, then come here’. See Abu Fulaan, ‘Bear Grills in Syrië’ (16 June 2014), [YouTube, account ‘De Basis’, episode 5]. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2LweJEB3AQ&t=5s (accessed 16 June 2016).
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