

Institutionalization of Islam: The Case of Belgium

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A. Introduction

1. Jonathan Laurence (2012)

*The emancipation of Europe's Muslims:
the state's role in minority integration.*

Princeton University press.

- Western European countries in the 1990s sought for “‘moderate’ yet legitimate interlocutors who can negotiate a representative bargain with the state in exchange for a monopoly on a set of narrowly defined religious issues” (Laurence 2012: 7).

- Aim: participation on the basis of equality as citizens in state and society;
by means of formal rules and institutional ties (2012: 8).

Questions:

1- Who is responsible for the chosen formulas?

1.a. Césari, J. (2004). “In order to keep the creation of a body representing Islam under its control, the government followed its own path and in 1998 organized elections among Muslims to establish the Executive Council of Islam in Belgium” (in **Aluffi & Zincone** 2004, abbreviated: A&Z, 2004: *The Legal Treatment of Islamic Minorities in Europe*. Leuven: Peeters, 20).

1.b. Rath et al., in A&Z, p. 161, (about the Netherlands).

“The final form taken by Islam – with all its variants – we consider to be the result of consultation and conflict between all kinds of involved parties. “

Question: was it different in Belgium?

2- Which year was the decision taken, e.g. in Belgium? Laurence, J.: *Exécutif des musulmans de Belgique (EMB)*: in 1994. (p. 13)

3- Which are the watershed years?

Laurence, J.: 1989, and a second time: 1996-1998.

1989: “There were several confrontational events involving Islam in the international arena that year” (Laurence: 25). 1996-1998: id.

2. Within Europe Laurence presents the following body of institutional solutions (2012: 13):

Table: Islamic Councils in Western Europe

Name	Date founded
Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich (IGGiÖ)	1979
Islamiska Samarbetsradets (IS, Sweden)	1990
Comision Islamica de Espana (CIE, Spain)	1992
Exécutif des musulmans de Belgique (EMB)	1994
Conseil français du culte musulman (CFCM, France)	2003
Contactorgaan Muslims en Overheid (CMO, Netherlands)	2004
Consulta per l'Islam in Italia (CII, Italy)	2005
Deutsche Islam Konferenz (DIK, Germany)	2006
Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB, UK)	2006

This can be supplemented with: (See: A&Z., p. 39-58)

Portugal: associations under private law, e.g. local Islamic Communities

Greece: old Islam with special status (since 1830);

new Islam without status

Romania: old Islam with recognized status;

new Islam without status.

3. Differences between the European countries

- the importance or not of regional or local Islamic institutions and platforms:
Germany (see Frégosi, 2009: 212);

- an Old versus New Islam, like in
Greece (Tsitselikis 2004: 109-113) (in A&Z),
Austria (Wieshaider 2004: 31) (in A&Z)
Romania (Iordache 2004: 201) (in A&Z);

- the memory of a former Islam (Spain);

Frégosi, F. (2009). 'Dynamiques d'institutionnalisation de l'islam en Europe: tentative de décryptage,' in **Frégosi, F.** (ed.). *Bruno Etienne, le fait religieux comme fait politique*. La Tour d'Aigues, L'Aub: 196-213.

4. Reasons to opt for a certain formula (Laurence)

- a. “to induce the ‘**moderation**’ of the religious organizations linked to transnational Islamists’ movements” (p. 11)

- b. “to bring state-mosque relations **out of the embassies** and Foreign Affairs ministries, and into domestic political institutions” (p. 14).

- c. “the developments in the European countries should be compared, more than with other matters, with the way people dealt with the **Jewish communities** and with the **working class** when they also sought to regulate their representation, or when people in other words wanted to raise their status from pre-citizenship to citizenship (p.132). “

or: “The Islam Councils are state-convened organizations that bring together the leadership of opposing camps (à la ‘capital and labor’) to marginalize extremists and achieve ‘moderate’ outcomes” (p. 135).

- d. “A rapid survey of Europe shows that in the cases where cooperation between the State and religious groups exists, the institutional recognition of Islam is somewhat facilitated” (Césari 2004: 19) (in A&Z: ‘Islamic minorities’ rights in Europe and in the USA,’ 11-29). (contested by Laurence...).

Nevertheless: “in 2010 as in 1990, Embassy-Islam leaders are the face and the voice of Muslim communities in Europe” (Laurence p. 220).

Result: the solutions in the different European countries are experienced as “imperfect institutionalisations”.

B. The facts in Belgium as seen/interpreted by participants at the debate: **(20 steps!)**

Beyens, D.Y. (2001). *L'alchimie de la médiation musulmane*.
Paris: La Medina.

Hallet, J. (2004). 'The status of Muslim minority in Belgium,'
in A&Z: 39-58.

Leman, J. Personal archives at KADOC, KU Leuven.

1. Articles 14, 17 and 117 of the Belgian Constitution: freedom of religion.

On 4 March 1870, law to regulate the management of **the temporal**
(i.e.: the management of the material, not theological aspects)
of **'recognised'** religions.

Other religions, without 'recognition', would also be allowed
to exist on Belgian territory,
but they would not be able to claim any financial support.

2. June 1969 the keys of the ‘**Eastern Pavilion**’ in the **E.U. district** in centre of **Brussels** were handed to **King Faysal of Saudi Arabia**, in order to establish an Islamic Cultural Centre (I.C.C.) , a sort of central mosque.

3. On 19 July 1974 Islam was placed by means of an amendment to the law on the same footing as the other already **recognised** religions.

A principle of organisation by province was established.

As from the school year 1974-75 Islamic religious courses were provided in the public education sector.

4. In 1980, the Muslim World League obtained the largest share in the management of the I.C.C. and received the right to appoint the I.C.C. imam-director, who acts as provisional head of the Islamic religion. One of the tasks: to present to the Belgian government from his interim position **a proposal for definitive regulation**. The imam-director didn't propose anything,

5. in 1985: a first attempt by the Belgian state to solve the question, submitted on 3 July 1985 for advice to the Council of State: a draft for a Royal Decree “establishing the Supreme Council of the Muslims of Belgium and for the establishment of the committees with the management of the temporal matters of the recognised Islamic communities”. Their proposal comprised an organisation on the basis of the provinces, as set out in the law of 19 July 1974. It means that the Belgian state, in 1985, clearly had an organisation of the Islamic communities in mind **on the basis of the Belgian model of organisation via provinces**.

Advice of the **Council of State** (09.10.1985):“there are insufficient reasons to claim that as far as the Islamic religion is concerned, Articles 18, 19 and 19 bis of the law of 4 March 1870 authorise the Government to establish a body for the representation of all the Muslims of Belgium.

These Articles must be strictly interpreted because although they do not regulate the internal organisation of the religions, they are nevertheless related to that organisation.”

6. on 29.03.1989, Abdallah Al-Ahdal, imam-director of the I.C.C. was murdered. It was also the period of the fatwa against Salman Rushdie because of his book The Satanic Verses.

Apart from that, more and more Belgian converts to Islam and younger intellectuals from the Islamic communities were questioning the fact that a Saudi imam-director and foreign embassies were acting as spokesmen for Muslims in Belgium.

7. 1989: Islamic communities around I.C.C. (new imam-director: Sameer Ar-Radhi) and Royal Commission for Migrant Policy (1989-1993) propose elections for the constitution of a council, representing Islamic communities: the body to be recognised would consist of 17 Muslims

At the same moment (1989), 2 announcements:

- . the creation of a first Islamic school in the French community of Belgium in the I.C.C. building;
- . preparations for elections for the representation in the Islamic communities, by a “Committee of Islamic Religion in Belgium”, with D.Y. Beyens, a Belgian convert, as one of their spokesmen.

Remember: 1989, watershed year (Laurence)

8. 15.02.1990: Refusal by the Belgian government,

Arguments:

- . lack of transparency, fear of too huge impact of the Muslim brotherhood as organizers of the elections;
- . lack of agreement among Muslims on the proposed formula;
- . opposition of embassies of Turkey and Morocco.

5 alternatives have been proposed, 2 from Muslim associations, a (not a common, but similar initiative) initiative coming from embassies, 2 coming from Belgian political parties.

a. an 'Islamic Federation of Belgium' (located in Antwerp), proposed that the government should simply appoint 12 members. "Such a method of appointment conforms with the traditions of the Islamic world, both Arab and African; the representations of Islam are always appointed by the various governments."

b. some Muslim intellectuals: working by the three Belgian regions, in which the representation's powers would be spread across three commissions: an education commission, a mosque commission and a representation for the socio-cultural Islamic associations. For the strictly cultural matters, an imam-director would remain in function at national level.

c. Turkish and Moroccan embassies:

Let the embassies take care of it, with as arguments:

- double citizenship
- more experience with Muslim world
- guarantee against extremisms.

2 solutions proposed during Government discussions:

d. provincial basis, cf. 1985 project.

e. “ the PS opts for the recognition of Islamic communities on a local basis, at least initially, without any systematic recourse to the elective principle”. And the dossier should be linked to the dossier of laïcité. (“Laïcité shall be legally recognised with the status of a religion”).

9. 31.03.1990: The elections, planned by the I.C.C. took place

10. The Minister of Justice suspended the Royal Decree of 03.05. 1978, the result being that the appointment of the imam-director of the I.C.C. as provisional head of the religion was also implicitly suspended.

11. inspired by the French model of the CORIF (*Conseil de réflexion sur l'islam en France*: Committee for the Study of Islam in France): a '**Provisional Council of Wise Men for the organisation of the Islamic religion in Belgium**' (19 persons, including 16 appointed by the Minister of Justice and 3 seats for the I.C.C.). The I.C.C. however refused to occupy the 3 seats and notified the representatives of the mosques of this.

(31.03.1990-25.09.1992)

12. 25.09.1992-31.03.1994: An autonomous Technical Committee for education matters.
(result of mediation Centre for equal opportunities – Committee of Islamic Religion in Belgium).

13. 31.03.1994 -13.12.1998:
An Executive of Muslims of Belgium with restricted powers :
“Exécutif des musulmans de Belgique” (Laurence)
with as chair: Y. D. Beyens of former Committee
of Islamic Religion in Belgium

Remember: watershed years 1996-1998 (Laurence)

14. on 24.06.1998 in Brussels, a major assembly of Muslims (imans, teachers, faithful mosque attendees, in total more than 1500 people) took place, in the presence of some people who were there representing the government, where the Executive explained the fundamentals of the new coming Royal Decree and the principle and the modalities of the elections (Beyens 2001: 113). The proposal was very favourably received. (cf. 1989)

15. 13.12.1998. Elections in 104 mosques and at 18 public places.
A total of 48,000 of the 70,000 registered voters turned up to vote.
Establishment of a Constituent Assembly.

16. Screening by State Security: 29 of the 54 elected members accepted, but there were 25 others who as adherents of 'brotherhood' adherence were refused as potential members for the Executive.

State security's decision:		+	-
Moroccans	19	6	13
Turks	14	9	5
Belgians	9	7	2
Other	12	7	5

17. On 07.02.1999 a Head of the Islamic Religion (Executive) with 17 members was established for 5 years: Roots: 7 Moroccans, 4 Turks, 3 Belgian converts and 3 others.

18. in 2003, the Executive, as indicated in 1998, changed one third of its membership. The newly constituted Executive was however dissolved in 2004, whereupon new elections took place on 20.03.2005. The Executive that arose from that in October 2005 continued to be almost paralysed by internal developments. “The Belgian state justified these interventions by reference to the threat of extremist infiltration and the conflicts between groups of Turkish and Moroccan origin” (Ferrari 2010: 23).

One could suspect that the developments between 2001 and 2006 in Belgium were the consequence of “nine-eleven” and of the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005).

It is only as **from 2007** that some calmness returned to the developments within the Executive and the first achievements were realised in the form of **the recognition of some mosques.**

19. In 2008, a new Minister of Justice asked the Islamic Executive to start up a reflection and to improve its way of working. All the mosques were contacted to participate. 2008-2012 was not an easy period.

2 opinions competed: (1) a first one wanted to continue with the electoral system, (2) a second one wanted to start up a new way of proceeding through the mosques.

In July 2013, an agreement was proposed to the Minister of Justice:

The mosques will sign a charter and propose **1 candidate per mosque (at least 200 members)**

for a common meeting. 282 mosques promised to participate at the process;

25 did not. Together the 282 candidates elect a **General Council** (Conseil général) of **52 members that will co-opt 10 other members** (5 men and 5 women)

for their useful qualifications. Together it makes a General Assembly of 60 members.

The Assembly will elect **17 members, 15 from the mosques (6 Bxl, 5 Fl. & 4 W.)**

and 2 co-opted members. Each region-chamber has its own president who is a vice-president in the national structure.

Each **6 years** a new General Assembly will be composed and each 3 years the Assembly can compose a new Executive, changing some members if they want it.

The project, accepted by the Executive and by the ad hoc commission was accepted by the government.

20. At 30.03.2014, the Executive transferred its competences with the agreement of the government, and in presence of all former presidents of former Executives, to the newly structured Executive.

And 02.04.2014: Royal Decree indicating 17 members, who, according to art. 2 of the Decree, will co-operate with the Bureau of the General Assembly.

+ 3 councils added to it:

- a council of theologians

- a council of arbitration

- a council of coordination of the islamic institutions of Belgium.

Concrete results:

Members: 8 Moroccan, 5 Turkish, 2 others (Balkan and convert)

+ 2 co-opted (1 Moroccan + 1 Turkish).

The secretariat takes care of: ca 700 teachers Islamic religion, 20 'recognized' and subsidized imams + 9 counsellors (jails).

(situation February 2015).

Final questions:

1. **What about our questions at the begin of the ppt?**
 - **Solution ‘imposed’ by Government? No.**
 - **More than one decision taken: in 1994, 1999, 2014, maybe also still later...**
 - **Watershed years: 1989, and 1996-1998: okay.**

2. **Remaining questions:**
 - **What about impact of embassies and countries of provenance? Is real! How to judge it?**
 - **What about European “Sitz im Leben” of Islam? (c.q. theology, EU dimensions,...)**

3. **Other remaining questions?**

Thanks, February

2015