

## A Belgian Imam Training: Mission Impossible?

Leni Franken

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La formation des cadres religieux musulmans en Europe

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Over the past decades, the number of (practicing) Muslims increased visibly in Belgium, but present Church-State regulations are not adequately adapted to accommodate the diversity of Muslim communities. This has also repercussions for the training of imams. In this contribution, I will briefly sketch the state of the art of this training in Belgium. In order to do so, I will start with an elaboration of Church-State relations in Belgium, where Islam has been one of the seven recognized religions since 1974. Subsequently, attention will be given to the local recognition of mosques and to recent changes on this matter. Furthermore, I will focus on the recent attempt to establish a 'Belgian' imam-training and on the reasons for its failure. Finally, some recommendations for improvement will be made.

**Leni Franken,**

*University of Antwerp, Belgium*

## **Abstract**

Over the past decades, the number of (practicing) Muslims increased visibly in Belgium, but present Church-State regulations are not adequately adapted to accommodate the diversity of Muslim communities. This has also repercussions for the training of imams. In this contribution, I will briefly sketch the state of the art of this training in Belgium. In order to do so, I will start with an elaboration of Church-State relations in Belgium, where Islam has been one of the seven recognized religions since 1974. Subsequently, attention will be given to the local recognition of mosques and to recent changes on this matter. Furthermore, I will focus on the recent attempt to establish a 'Belgian' imam-training and on the reasons for its failure. Finally, some recommendations for improvement will be made.

## **Résumé**

*Depuis plusieurs décennies, le nombre de musulmans (pratiquants) a considérablement augmenté en Belgique, mais la législation sur les cultes ne permet pas de prendre en compte la diversité des communautés musulmanes. Cela a aussi des effets sur la formation des imams. Dans cet article, je tracerai à grand traits l'état de cette formation en Belgique. Pour cela, je commencerai par des remarques sur les rapports entre Églises et État en Belgique, où l'islam est une des sept religions reconnues depuis 1974. Ensuite, je m'intéresserai à la reconnaissance des mosquées au niveau local et aux évolutions récentes en la matière. Après cela, je me concentrerai sur les tentatives récentes pour créer une formation « belge » des imams, et les raisons de leur échec. Enfin, je ferai quelques recommandations pour améliorer la situation.*

Over the past decades, the number of Muslims in Western Europe has increased significantly. In this context, there is, amongst others, a “dire need for a well-educated and well-trained imam corps” in Europe (Hashas et al. 2018: 34). However, in spite of this need, the training of imams in Europe is a

contested, delicate and challenging issue (see e.g. Aslan and Windisch 2012; Hashas et al. 2018; Vinding and Chbib 2020; Boender 2021). This is also the case in Belgium, where the number of (practicing) Muslims increased visibly over the past fifty years. Although there are no official statistics of religious affiliation in Belgium, the number of Muslims is estimated at five to seven percent<sup>1</sup>. In large cities and their agglomerations, this number is often over 15-20 percent. This relative high number of Muslims, compared to other religious minorities, is mainly the result of labor migration during the 1960s and 1970s, which attracted many Muslims from Turkey and Morocco. In the 1980s and 1990s, this migration was followed by family reunification, post-communist migration from the Balkans and, more recently still, by refugee crises.

In spite of this relatively long presence of Muslims in Belgium, present Church-State regulations are not adequately adapted to accommodate the diverse Muslim communities. In this contribution, I will illustrate why this is one of the main causes for the failure to establish a Belgian imam-training program. In order to make this clear, I will start with a brief elaboration of Church-State relations in Belgium, with particular attention for the recognition of Islam and the establishment of the *Executive of Muslims in Belgium*. Subsequently, attention will be given to the local recognition of mosques, which is required in order to obtain state subsidies for their maintenance and for their imams. Furthermore, attention will be given to the recent attempt to establish a 'Belgian' imam-training program. At the end of the contribution, I will explain how the Belgian sports policy could be inspiring for the future policy concerning Islam (and other religions) and for the formation of imams and other religious leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the SMRE database, the number of Muslims in Belgium is 5% (see: [https://www.smre-data.ch/en/data\\_exploring/religious\\_affiliation#/mode/majority\\_religion/period/2010/dataset/1562/presentation/map](https://www.smre-data.ch/en/data_exploring/religious_affiliation#/mode/majority_religion/period/2010/dataset/1562/presentation/map), access 14 january 2022), while the PEW research centre estimates this number at 7.6% (<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>, access 14 January 2022).

## Church and State in Belgium and the Recognition of Islam

### *State Support for Recognized Religions*

In Belgium, the salaries and pensions of ministers of recognized religions and non-denominational worldviews are paid for by the State (Const. art.181). The amounts required are charged annually to the budget. In addition, “[s]chools run by the public authorities offer, until the end of compulsory education, the choice between the teaching of one of the recognized religions and non-denominational ethics teaching” (Const. art.24)<sup>2</sup>. At present, there are seven recognized “worldviews”: six religions (the Anglican, Christian-Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic Church, Islam and Judaism) and one non-confessional worldview (secular humanism). Three other requirements for recognition are pending: for Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Syrian-Orthodox Church<sup>3</sup>. In order to become recognized, the following requirements must be fulfilled:

- (1) bringing together a relatively large number (“several tens of thousands”) of adherents
- (2) being structured in such a way that there is a representative body that can represent the religion in question in its relations with civil authorities
- (3) having been present in the country for a fairly long period (“several decennia”)
- (4) presenting some level of social benefit
- (5) not encompassing any activity that is contrary to public order

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<sup>2</sup> These non-denominational schools are established, financed and controlled by (local) state authorities and count for about 31% of all Flemish schools and 48% of all Walloon schools. The other Belgian schools (about 68%) are state-funded Catholic – and thus denominational – schools. In addition, a small number of schools are state-funded non-Catholic schools (e.g. Jewish, non-confessional, freinet, protestant [only in the Flemish Community] or Muslim [only in the French Community]).

<sup>3</sup> According to the present federal government agreement, Buddhism will be recognized as a second *non-confessional worldview* under present legislature. Information available from: [https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/Regeerakkoord\\_2020.pdf](https://www.belgium.be/sites/default/files/Regeerakkoord_2020.pdf), p.76 (access 13 January 2022).

If these requirements are fulfilled, the Ministry of Justice can give positive advice for recognition, on which the Parliament has a final decisive role. Once recognized, the Ministry of Justice is in charge of the subsidies for salaries, pensions and optional subsidies for the representative bodies of the recognized religions.

However, fulfilling the required criteria for recognition is not evident. One of the main problems is that religious organizations have to be “structured in such a way that there is a representative organ representing the religion in question in its relations with civil authorities”. Because this criterion is based on the internal structure and the hierarchical organization of the Roman Catholic Church, it is very difficult for many religions and worldviews to fulfil it. In the past, protestants and secular humanists struggled with this requirement, which is also an important burden for the pending recognition of Buddhism.

#### *The Executive of Muslims in Belgium (EMB)*<sup>4</sup>

“Compared to other religions like Roman Catholicism, European Islam does not have a rigid structure with a monopoly on legitimate power”. (El Asri 2018: 110) Rather, ‘Islam’ is a very diversified religious tradition, with different (local) traditions, religious interpretations and law schools. In spite of this diversity, different Muslim communities in Belgium were, in order to become recognized and thus receive systematic financial state support, required to gather in one single representative body, which is supposed to negotiate between the Belgian State and the Muslims in Belgium<sup>5</sup>.

In 1974, when Islam was officially recognized by the Belgian State, the Islamic Cultural Centre, which had been established in 1968 and had strong

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<sup>4</sup> For a profound analysis of church-regimes and their impact on the Institutionalization of Islamic organizations, see Loobuyck et al. 2013.

<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, the French Government attempted “to create a single, national representative Muslim body with which to negotiate and deliberate” (Bader 2017: 161; see also Franken 2016: 144-145), but without considerable success.

(financial) connections with Saudi Arabia and the Islamic World League, functioned in practice as the mediator between the Islamic communities and the Belgian State, but it has never been officially recognized as a representative body<sup>6</sup>. Triggered by the success of ultra-right and anti-Islam populism in the 1990s (cf. *infra*), but also by a new awareness of the needs of the Muslim communities, several initiatives were taken by the Belgian Government in order to create a “new”, official representative body for Islam: the “Executive of Muslims in Belgium” (EMB). However, these attempts did, amongst others due to the internal diversity of the Muslim communities, the different languages spoken in Belgium, and far-going interference of the Belgian State, not always succeed. Up until today, the EMB is criticized for a number of reasons, including: a too lax attitude with regard to the prevention and condemnation of radicalization in Islam; its ongoing policy of importing imams from abroad (mainly from Turkey and Morocco); its failure to establish a full training program for Belgian imams; and its permissive policy with regard to Islamic Religious Education in state schools<sup>7</sup>. Overall, these criticisms share the same common ground: too much state interference from abroad, in particular from Morocco and Turkey. This is one of the main reasons why the Minister of Justice recently refused to donate the EMB a subsidy of €639.000 (Het Nieuwsblad 2021) and revoked the recognition of the present (recently reformed) EMB. At the moment of writing, the EMB seems to be in the most profound crisis since its establishment in 1999.

### **The recognition of local faith-communities in Belgium**

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<sup>6</sup> The Islamic World League or Muslim World League is an international, Islamic, non-governmental organisation, of which the centre is located in Mecca. The League promotes Islam in an active way: it coordinates and educates imams and religious education (RE) teachers; it edits, prints and distributes its own Qurans and Quran interpretations; and it finances mosques, Islamic schools and Islamic RE worldwide. Because the World League is mainly financed by the government of Saudi Arabia, it is an important exponent of Wahhabism.

<sup>7</sup> For the latter, see e.g. Franken & Sägeser 2021.

In addition to the abovementioned recognition at the *federal* or national level, Belgium has also a policy of recognition at the *local* level. This recognition of local faith communities (e.g. mosques, synagogues, parishes) is governed by the semi-autonomous regions in Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels-capital) and by the German-speaking Community<sup>8</sup>. An important consequence of this regional policy is that the salaries and pensions of delegates of the recognized religions are only paid by the Ministry of Justice (*federal* level) if these delegates are associated with a faith community that has been recognized at the *regional* level as well.

Triggered by increasing Muslim extremism, the Flemish criteria for the recognition of local faith communities have been modified recently<sup>9</sup>. Since 22 October 2021, the Decree for the Recognition of Local Faith Communities (*Erkenningsdecreet Lokale Geloofsgemeenschappen*)<sup>10</sup> requires, amongst others, the following criteria:

- financial and juridical transparency in the local faith community
- no foreign financing or support which detracts the autonomy of the faith community and/or which is related to terrorism, extremism, espionage, or clandestine interference
- demonstrable societal relevance of the local faith community

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<sup>8</sup> Belgium is a federal state, with a complex structure, containing three *regions* (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and three *Communities* (French, German and Flemish). While the regions have jurisdiction over 'space-bounded' matters (e.g. regional economy, agriculture, environment, infrastructure and transport, recognition of local faith communities), the Communities have jurisdiction over 'person-related' matters (e.g. health care, social policy, culture, sports, the use of language and education). With more than 6,500,000 people, the Flemish Community, where the official language is Dutch, is the largest Community. The French Community is the second Community, with more than 4,200,000 inhabitants and French as its official language. The German Community, where German is the official language, is a very small Community, with about 76,000 inhabitants.

<sup>9</sup> In this contribution, we will focus on the criteria of the Flemish region, which is the largest region in Belgium. In the other regions, the criteria for recognizing local faith communities are largely similar.

<sup>10</sup> <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/Zoeken/Document.aspx?DID=1036223&param=inhoud&AID=1299025>

- board members of the faith community respect human rights, in particular with regard to non-discrimination, rejecting hate and violence, and respecting freedom of religion
- ministers of worship and their substitutes satisfy the civic integration obligation<sup>11</sup> and are not paid by a foreign government
- a waiting period of four years is foreseen [before recognition]

At present, most mosques in Belgium are not recognized as local faith communities. As a consequence, their imams are not paid for by the State. While the total number of mosques in Belgium is estimated at more than 300 (cf. Rea 2016: 70), only 90 of them are currently recognized: 25 in Flanders, 26 in Brussels-capital and 39 in Wallonia<sup>12</sup>. For this low number of recognized mosques, there are at least three explanations. First, several mosques prefer full autonomy over recognition, as the latter implies a certain level of state control. Second, numerous mosques do, as yet, not meet the required criterions for recognition, amongst others because their administration is inefficient. Third, there is often political reluctance to recognize mosques, as Islam is often associated with fundamentalism and terrorism. In Flanders for instance, there have been no new recognitions since 2013 (Deredactie 2021b). In 2014, the previous responsible Minister (Flemish Nationalist Party) put the recognition officially on hold, until the new, more stringent criterions for recognition were approved.

In addition, we should also notice that there are many Turkish mosques in Belgium, of which around the half are managed by *Diyanet* (the Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs). Even though most of these mosques are

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<sup>11</sup> Since 2013, immigrants in Belgium are required to participate in the civic integration program, which aims at “autonomous and proportionate participation, active citizenship and social coherence”. Hereto, training courses (language training and societal orientation) are organized (see: <https://codex.vlaanderen.be/portals/codex/documenten/1023121.html>, access 18-01-2022).

<sup>12</sup> Actual numbers available from: <https://www.embnet.be/nl/erkende-moskeeen> (Brussels Capital and Flanders) and <https://www.embnet.be/fr/mosquees-reconnues> (Brussels Capital and Wallonia) (access 20-01-2022).



recognized by the Belgian state, they do not apply for Belgian financial state support. Instead, they prefer a more generous payment of their imams by *Diyanet*. Additionally, some *Diyanet* mosques do not prefer recognition by the Belgian state.

Although the new criteria for recognition are required for *all* local faith communities (at least if they apply for recognition), their recent update is in particular caused by fear for Muslim extremism, which is often connected to foreign influence. This influence, according to the criteria, should be avoided if it hinders the autonomy of local faith communities or if there are clear bonds with terrorism, extremism, espionage, or clandestine interference. But what does this mean for imams, who preach in Belgium, but who are, up until the present day, not trained in Belgium? Is it possible to reduce foreign influence if most if not all imams are educated and trained abroad? Should we, in order to avoid “undesired” foreign influence and involvement, consider a Belgian imam training?

### **The Training of Imams in Belgium**

Like many European countries, Belgium has “after decades of negligence [...], woken up to the fact that Muslim communities lack imams who know the country where they function, its language(s), its history, laws, and other related information” (Hashas et al. 2018: 33). In 1974, Islam has been officially recognized by the Belgian state, but for many years, most politicians and policy makers were not concerned about Muslims in Belgium. This changed in the 1990s, when the far-right political party *Vlaams Blok* (now: *Vlaams Belang*), which promotes an anti-Islamic program, was very successful. Although this party, which is still very popular in Flanders, never participated in the Government, they nevertheless challenged other political parties to reflect on the presence of Muslims in Belgium and on their integration. In this regard, it is not a surprise that the first attempts to establish an official representative body for the Muslim community in Belgium dates from the early 1990s.

A decade later, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington (2001) once again triggered “the Muslim question” (Norton 2013) in Belgium. In addition, the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) and the high number of Belgian foreign terrorist fighters<sup>13</sup> challenged Belgian politicians and policy makers to implement an improved policy concerning Islam. Examples of such a policy are the abovementioned civic integration obligation (2013)<sup>14</sup>, the reorganization of the EMB, and the engagement to improve Islamic Religious Education in state schools (2016)<sup>15</sup>. In addition, the Parliamentary Investigation Commission which had been established after the 2016 terrorist attacks<sup>16</sup>, mentions amongst others: the promotion of a moderate Islam and the countering of radical ideologies; the recognition of more mosques and transparency of these mosques; an improvement of the EMB’s functioning, which implies a decline of foreign influence; more recognized imams; cooperation between different (monotheist) religious communities; abolishing the concession of the Great Mosque in Brussels (see footnote xxix); and deradicalization programs for detainees.

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<sup>13</sup> With a number of 498 registered foreign fighters, Belgium has the highest number of Foreign Terrorist Fighters per capita in Europe (Deredactie 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *supra*, note xiii.

<sup>15</sup> In order to improve the quality of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in Flemish State schools, the Flemish Minister of Education and the director of the EMB signed a Statement of Engagement for Qualitative Islamic Religious Education in 2016 (<https://www.embnet.be/nl/het-emb-en-minister-crevits-ondertekenen-een-engagementsverklaring-voor-kwalitatief-moslimonderwijs>) (access 18-01-2022). This statement aims at “the improvement of IRE and the investment in training and refreshment courses for IRE teachers”. In order to realise this, four points of action are identified: (1) in-service teacher training, (2) an actualisation (optimisation) of the present teacher degrees for IRE, (3) the appointment of an extra inspector, and (4) the reorganisation of the Centre for Islamic Education. In the French Community, the situation is different: since 2016/2017, IRE has been reduced to one hour per week, to allow space for a new course on philosophy and citizenship (CPC). Since the French-speaking part of Belgium has a long tradition of looking towards the French system of *laïcité*, many have long believed that religion should not have any place at all in state schools and are determined to see the end of public funding for RE. Hence there are no considerable efforts from the government to improve the quality of IRE, which is in the French Community widely perceived as a subject that will, like the other RE subjects, ultimately be dropped out of the general curricula in state schools (cf. Franken & Sägerser 2021: 42-45).

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf\\_sections/publications/attentats/Brochure\\_Terreuraanslagen.pdf](https://www.dekamer.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/attentats/Brochure_Terreuraanslagen.pdf)

These initiatives are not a coincidence. Well-organized, global networks of Muslim fundamentalists have an important influence on the West and an increasing number of Muslims who are born and raised in Europe are susceptible to extremist and fundamentalist ideologies. In order to counter this, more and more Belgian politicians plead for a Belgian formation of imams, which is controlled and accredited by the State.

However, in spite of political goodwill and in spite of the present demand for imams, the profession of imam seems, amongst others due to uncertain future perspectives, to be unattractive for most Belgian Muslims (cf. CIRRA 2021, 28). Due to this lack of interest, most imams in Belgium are not trained in Belgium<sup>17</sup>, but at foreign madrassas and universities, for instance in Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Morocco and Turkey. Although at least two imam hatib schools are present in Belgium (one in Flanders and one in Wallonia), these schools are neither recognized, nor subsidized by the Ministry of Education, but by Diyanet and Milli Görüs (cf. Leman 2018). Besides, several training programs on Islamic theology exist in Belgium<sup>18</sup>, but these programs, which are mainly governed and financed by foreign organizations, are not recognized by the Belgian state and/or by the EMB. Examples are the Académie Islamique de Bruxelles (Almizan)<sup>19</sup>, l'Institut des Études Islamiques in Brussels<sup>20</sup>, the Islamic Faculty of Europe in Ghent<sup>21</sup>, and the Jisr Al Amana Institute for higher education in Antwerp<sup>22</sup>.

In order to “take preventive actions against radicalization and extremism”, the EMB organized several refreshing courses for recognized

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<sup>17</sup> For an analysis of imams in Flanders, see Loobuyck et al. 2013 and Loobuyck and Meier 2014.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview, see CIRRA 2021, 22-28.

<sup>19</sup> <http://almizanaacademie.org/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://iei.alkhalil.be/institut>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ifeg.be/>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.jaai.be/pages/blog\\_article.php?PAGEID=191](http://www.jaai.be/pages/blog_article.php?PAGEID=191)

imams and Islam consultants<sup>23</sup> in the past<sup>24</sup>. These courses aimed at “the development of an open, tolerant Islam with respect for the Belgian society and for living together” as well as at the perfection of knowledge of imams and Islam consultants “at the level of religious, sociological and juridical matters”<sup>25</sup>. In addition, initiatives have been taken at the University of Antwerp, where a study on the feasibility of training for Muslim professionals has been conducted in 2008 (Piqeray et al 2008). Since September 2014, a master in Islamic studies is organized at the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven). This is, however, not an imam training, but an academic training which rather aims at profound knowledge about Islam and at interreligious dialogue. The initiative did not attract many students, and most of them were women and non-Muslims – and thus no potential imams.

In the francophone part of Belgium, the *Institut de promotion des formations sur l’islam* (IPFI)<sup>26</sup> has been established in 2017<sup>27</sup>. This institute, wherein amongst other delegates of the EMB, delegates of the Ministry of Education, and scientific university staff cooperate, is supported by the Ministry of Education. However, although one of its missions is “proposing, supporting and financing trainings for imams [...]”<sup>28</sup>, this mission has not been realized (as yet).

In order to counter this lacuna, the preceding Minister of Justice (2022) has taken the initiative to establish a full-fledged Belgian training for imams. The training, which was supposed to be organized in the Great Mosque in Brussels<sup>29</sup>, should contain two parts: on the one hand, there should be a secular

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<sup>23</sup> In Belgium, recognized religions have the right to provide state-funded moral and religious assistance in prison, hospitals and the army. Hence the reference to ‘Islam consultants’.

<sup>24</sup> See: <https://www.embnet.be/nl/opleidingen-imams> (access 18-01-2022).

<sup>25</sup> See: <https://www.embnet.be/nl/opleidingen-imams> (access 18-01-2022).

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ipfi.be/a-propos/>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/decreet/2016/12/14/2017010277/staatsblad>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.ipfi.be/a-propos/#rapport> (access 18-01-2022).

<sup>29</sup> This mosque was built in 1879 and was used in 1897 for the oriental (Egyptian) part of the world expo. In 1969, the building, which has been redecorated as a mosque, and has been officially inaugurated in 1978, was leased to the ICC for 99 years. However, since the terrorist attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016), the management of the mosque has been increasingly criticized and has been accused by state

part, containing general courses such as sociology of religion, law, and Arabic philosophy. For the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (Flanders), these courses would be organized at the KU Leuven, while the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), located in Louvain-la-Neuve, would organize these courses for the French-speaking part of Belgium (Wallonia).

In addition, the planned imam-training should also contain a theological part. In order to establish this, an academic council (AFOR) was established within the EMB. Hereto, a subsidy of 192,000 euros was granted by the Minister of Justice in 2020<sup>30</sup>. However, in spite of this subsidy and the establishment of AFOR, there is still no theological part for the imam training. Because Salah Echalloui, who was the president of AFOR, resigned the EMB following state security allegations (cf. *infra*) and because the Region of Brussels refused to recognize the great mosque which should house the planned imam training, the whole process came to an impasse. Hence, the Minister of Justice canceled further subsidies for AFOR.

The present uncertainty about the theological part – and thus about a full-fledged imam training – has also consequences for the enrolment of students for the secular part: for the academic year 2020-21, only five students were enrolled at the KU Leuven (Flanders), while no students were enrolled at the UCL in Wallonia (Lesoir 2021).

### **No undesired foreign Influence?**

With the planned Belgian imam training program, policy makers hoped that imams in Belgium would be better aware of the Belgian context which is,

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security for islamist propaganda. In April 2019, the leasing contract with the ICC was abolished. Since then, the Great Mosque, is governed by the EMB, which required its official recognition. In December 2020, however, the Minister of Justice refused to recognize the Great Mosque which is, according to the Minister, still too much influenced from abroad (Destandaard 2020).

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/doc/rech\\_f.htm](https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/doc/rech_f.htm)

in addition to profound theological knowledge, a requirement for imams preaching in the secular European context:

Whereas the essential qualification of imams in Muslim majority countries is a first and foremost profound knowledge of the Islamic scriptural sources, legal-ethical traditions and ritual guidance, the European secular context requires new skills of imams to answer questions facing Muslims here. (Boender 2021: 2; see also Hashas et al. 2018: 23)

In addition, a Belgian formation of imams is considered a means to diminish “undesired” foreign influence (DeStandaard 2019). In order to establish such a training, there is, within the EMB, an urgent need for consensus on this matter. However, in addition to persistent differences between amongst others Turkish and Moroccan communities, there is also an increasing discrepancy between, on the one hand, an older generation of members of the EMB who strongly emphasize their Turkish or Moroccan ethnicity and, on the other hand, a younger generation of Muslims (including some Islamic experts) which are born and raised in Belgium and do not have much affinity with this older generation (cf. Deredactie 2022; Destandaard 2022). These internal dissensions do not only trigger Belgian state intervention, but they also cause foreign state intervention. And this, in its turn, impedes the establishment of a Belgian training program for imams.

In order to illustrate this, we will have a closer look at some recent problems with AFOR. First, Salah Echallaoui, who was the previous president of the EMB as well as the president of AFOR, has been accused by state security of espionage for the Moroccan Government (Deredactie 2020). In addition, Coşkun Beyazgül, who is the current vice-president of AFOR, is also president of the Belgian department of *Diyanet*, which is closely connected to the AKP and thus with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkish nationalist views on Islam (Destandaard 2021a). Even though Echallaoui rejected the accusations of state security, both cases show at least that a complete abolishment of foreign influence is, at present, an illusion.

According to the present Minister of a.o. integration and equal opportunities (2022), there is a “fundamental problem with the Executive of Muslims”, where “too much influences from abroad” exist (Deredactie 2021a). In order to counter this, the Minister pleads for a profound reform of the EMB: “It is important to have another climate [within the EMB]. Another kind of people, which can far better build bridges between a religion and our Flemish society, should be put forward” (Deredactie 2021a). In a similar vein, the current Minister of Justice (2022) wants to end foreign involvement in the EMB:

There are reports from our nation, but also from abroad, which make clear that organisations such as Diyanet and the Rassemblement des Musulmans de Belgique<sup>31</sup> are vehicles for foreign governments in order to hold a grip on the Muslim community. [...] This is foreign involvement, and this proves once again that there really is a problem with the Executive. (Deredactie 2021a)

### **Islam in Belgium: Religion as a Sport?**

The recurring malfunctioning of the EMB hinders the establishment of a Belgian imam training program. At this point, however, one may ask whether it is necessary for all Muslim communities in Belgium to unify in *one* representative body. As noticed by Veit Bader (2017: 155), a certain administrative and/or legal recognition of religions/worldviews is unavoidable in a liberal state. It is, however, unrealistic to expect that different faith communities which are amongst others characterized by theological, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, gather in one single representative body which then represents one single religion or worldview. Because different religions and worldviews are internally dynamic and diversified, a uniform recognition seems impossible. I therefore agree, with Bader (2017), that a system of recognition, organized in a *bottom up* way, is to be preferred over a top-down

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<sup>31</sup> “The Union of Muslims of Belgium (Rassemblement des Musulmans de Belgique) is an umbrella organization that coordinates the activities of mosques which are members of the EMB and promotes the training of new leaders, imams and teachers. It is essentially a grouping of Moroccan mosques and it maintains privileged links with the highest political and religious Moroccan authorities.” (Rea 2016: 70)

approach. Such a system, which is labeled by Bader (2017: 170) as *associational democracy*...

... keeps the type of representative organization open (one centralized vs. federations or pluralist representation by some independent organisations); and it does not insist that Muslims are represented by one organization while Christians are represented by several denominations.

In this “realistic utopia” (Bader 2017: 172), “a central, nation-wide, « public » or legal recognition is not required for representation and cooperation on provincial or local levels” (Bader 2017: 170). Although faith communities have the possibility to “develop national organisations or associational structures [...] in order to more effectively propagate and proselytize, to influence civil society and [...] to lobby”, this cooperation is not imposed by the state, but comes, in an open, pluralistic and voluntary way, from the religious associations themselves.

In view of this, the present Belgian policy concerning sports could be illustrative. In Belgium, the policy concerning sports is not a federal (national) matter, but a local matter, which is governed by the three semi-autonomous Communities (Flemish, French, German). In the Flemish Community, the public agency *Sport Vlaanderen* is responsible for the recognition of sports federations and their associated sports clubs. In order to be recognized as a sports federation, several criteria must be fulfilled, such as financial transparency, geographical spread, sustainability, and a minimum number of members. At present, 1,4 million sportspersons are members of one (or more) of the 18,000 sports clubs which are associated with a recognized sports federation. In total, 66 federations are recognized: 51 of them are recognized and subsidized, while 15 are only recognized. Sports clubs can freely decide whether or not to affiliate with a recognized federation.

In addition to the recognition of the sports federations, *Sport Vlaanderen* is also responsible for the recognition and financial support of particular sports



clubs. In order to become recognized as a club, several criteria, e.g. with regard to safety, infrastructure, ethical and health policy, and skills of the trainers, must be fulfilled. With regard to the latter, the Flemish training school (*Vlaamse trainersschool* – VTS) organizes training courses in diverse sports disciplines. Hereto, *Sport Vlaanderen*, several Flemish Universities (KU Leuven, Ghent University, VUB) and university colleges as well as the recognized sports federations, cooperate.

Of course, a mosque is not a sports club, Islam is not a sport, and an Imam is not a sports trainer. Nevertheless, since religion as well as sports are in Belgium considered to be *common goods* and are therefore supported by the state, it is evident that some objective criteria, amongst others with regard to skills of trainers and religious leaders, must be fulfilled in order to receive this state support. Obviously, society does not benefit from poorly educated sports trainers and likewise, it does not benefit from poorly educated religious leaders.

In order to break the deadlock of the planned imam training, a policy wherein different local Islamic organisations are voluntarily recognized and cooperate with the (regional) state could, like a policy wherein different sports federations are recognized and cooperate with the Flemish or French Communities, be an improvement. Although for instance judo, taekwondo, jiu-jitsu and karate are all martial arts, they all have their own sports federation – and thus also their own trainers and training programs. In a similar way, tennis, squash and badminton are all racket sports, but no one would question the fact that they are represented in three particular sports federations, with three different training programs. Why, then, should this be different for religions and for the training of religious leaders?

In view of a Belgian training for imams – or better: Belgian trainings for imams – a bottom-up recognition of different Islamic faith communities, with different training programs wherein these (sometimes voluntarily associated) communities cooperate with the state (for instance with regard to language

training and the organisation of “secular” courses such as philosophy, law and sociology), could be taken into consideration. By extension, such an approach could also have its merits for other faith communities in Belgium, which often face similar problems with their ‘representative body’ and of which religious leaders are, due to a lack of ‘Belgian’ training programs (and thus similar to imams in Belgium), often trained abroad.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> At present, accredited and recognized training programs exist for Catholic Priests, Protestant pastors and humanist moral consultants. For these programs, the Belgian state cooperates with the representative body of the respective religion/worldview and with different universities. For Anglicanism, orthodox Christianity and Judaism, such programs do not (as yet) exist in Belgium. Hence, their religious leaders, like imams, obtain their theological training abroad.

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