By gathering 39 local scholars, experts, and civil society activists specialized in racism and human rights, the fourth edition of the European Islamophobia Report addresses a still timely and politically important issue. All 34 country reports included in this book follow a unique structure that is convenient, first, for comparing country reports and, second, for selected readings on a particular topic such as politics, employment, or education with regards to Islamophobia across Europe.

The present report investigates in detail the underlying dynamics that directly or indirectly support the rise of anti-Muslim racism in Europe. This extends from Islamophobic statements spread in national media to laws and policies that restrain the fundamental rights of European Muslim citizens. As a result, the European Islamophobia Report 2018 discusses the impact of anti-Muslim discourse on human rights, multiculturalism, and the state of law in Europe.

This fourth edition of our report highlights how European societies are challenged by the rise of violent far-right groups that do not only preach hatred of Muslims but also participate in the organization of bloody terror attacks. The rise of far-right terrorist groups such as AFO (Action of Operational Forces) in France or the network Hannibal in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland confirms EUROPOL’s alarming surveys on the growing danger of right-wing terrorism.

This year, SETA worked in cooperation with the Leopold Weiss Institute, an Austrian NGO based in Vienna dedicated to the research of Muslims in Europe. In addition, the European Union has funded the European Islamophobia Report 2018 through the program “Civil Society Dialogue Between EU and Turkey (CSD-V)”.

**About SETA**

Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) is a non-profit research institute based in Turkey dedicated to innovative studies on national, regional and international issues. SETA is the leading think tank in Turkey and has offices in Ankara, Istanbul, Washington D.C. and Cairo. The objective of SETA is to produce up-to-date and accurate knowledge and analyses in the fields of politics, economy, and society, and inform policy makers and the public on changing political, economic, social, and cultural conditions. Through research reports, publications, brainstorming sessions, conferences and policy recommendations, SETA seeks to guide leaders in government, civil society, and business, and contributes to informed decision making mechanisms.
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ISLAMOPHOBIA IN BELGIUM
NATIONAL REPORT 2018

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Disclaimer: Statements of fact and opinion in the national reports of the European Islamophobia Report are those of the respective authors. They are not the expression of the editors or the funding institutions and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union and Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Directorate for EU Affairs.

Executive Summary

As with preceding years, Islamophobia in Belgium has continued to grow and to permeate diverse aspects of Belgian society. The nature of Islamophobia in Belgium remains constant – it is based on narratives of threat and perceived alterity of Islam and Muslims. Direct manifestations of Islamophobia throughout 2018 have been widespread and have affected Islamic sites with physical attacks and graffiti on mosques, Islamic practices such as halal slaughter, and also presumed Muslim individuals.

During 2018, far right political and socio-political movements have had significant influence on Islamophobic narratives and action in the nation, particularly apparent in the case of the far right socio-politically-led Marche contre Marrakech in December which saw the overt manifestation of the intersection of traditional anti-immigrant racisms with anti-Muslim racisms. Furthermore, Islamophobia in Belgium is increasingly normalised, evident for example in the number of reported cases pertaining to Islamophobia in the police force, mainstream and popularised media narratives perpetuating Islamophobic tropes, and continued policy limiting expressions of Muslimness.

Islamophobia in Belgium during 2018 has continued to have a distinctly gendered dimension – with numerous attacks against visibly Muslim women in particular. Examples of attacks against Muslim women range from verbal aggressions, denial of access to services, Muslim women forcibly having the headscarf removed, and go as far as attempted rape. National Islamophobic debates continue to focus on the headscarf, and in this area, some gains and losses have been made – whilst some organisations have made accommodations of Muslim women’s dress, key figures continue to demonise visible Muslimness in the nation.

At the heart of Europe, the Belgian capital hosts a distinct far right presence at the supranational political level. In 2018, plans for the opening of a far-right think tank in Brussels to support associated European politicians were announced by Steve Bannon in the USA – showing the globalising nature of Islamophobia and its potential to impact the nation.

Counter-Islamophobia work and activism remains strong and effective in Belgium, with increasingly comprehensive reporting and counter-action as detailed below.
Résumé


Pendant 2018, l’Islamophobie en Belgique a continué d’avoir un caractère sexiste – avec des attaques nombreuses faites aux femmes visiblement Musulmanes en particulier ; y compris des agressions verbales, refus de service, des foulards arrachés et un viol tentative. Débats nationaux continue de mettre le foulard/voile au point, et dans ce cas il y a eu des améliorations et des pertes avec quelques adaptations faites dans certaines organisations et aussi des personnages clés qui continue de diaboliser les Musulmans et leur visibilité dans la nation.


Les travaux contre-Islamophobie reste forts et effectifs en Belgique, avec des reportages et actions de plus en plus compréhensibles, détaillé dans cette partie de ce compte rendu.
Country Profile

Country: Belgium
Type of Regime: Federal constitutional monarchy
Form of Government: Representative democratic federal parliamentary system comprised of a bicameral parliament, consisting of the Senate and Chamber of Representatives, headed by the monarch.
Ruling Parties: The most recent Belgian governmental coalition is formed of twelve members; francophone parties include Mouvement Réformateur and Dutch parties are Christen Democratische en Vlaamse and Open Vlaamse Liberaal en Democraten.
Opposition Parties: Belgian proportional representation typically gives way to numerous parties rather than a biparty system; thus, at the federal level in Flanders Socialistische Partij Anders, Vlaams Belang and Groen, and in francophone Belgium Centre Démocrate Humaniste, Écolo, Parti Socialiste, Parti Populaire and Démocrate Fédéraliste Indépendant form the opposition. This naturally changes at the local parliamentary levels.
Last Elections: Most recent federal elections took place on 25 May 2014 (these run on a five-yearly cycle, coinciding with the European Parliamentary elections). These saw NVA secure thirty-three of one hundred and fifty seats, PS won twenty-three seats, MR secured twenty, CD&V obtained eighteen, and Open VLD fourteen seats.
Total Population: 11 million counted in 2011 census.
Major Languages: Flemish in Flanders (approximately 59% of total population). Wallonia and Brussels are predominantly francophone. Finally, 0.7% of the total population is German-speaking and based in francophone Liège. English is also widely spoken.
Official Religion: There is no official state religion in Belgium. However, Christianity, Islam and Judaism are officially recognised, with much of the nation identifying as Roman Catholic.
Statistics on Islamophobia: The Counter Islamophobia Collective in Belgium (Collectif Contre l’Islamophobie en Belgique – CCIB/Collectief Tegen Islamofobie en België – CTIB) documents statistics annually on Islamophobia in Belgium, based on evidence derived from the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities (UNIA), and direct reports. Last year, the CCIB dealt with seventy cases defined as Islamophobic. Of those, 76% affected Muslim women and only 24% targeted Muslim males.
Statistics on Racism and Discrimination: Statistics are compiled by UNIA, under seventeen of the nineteen legal bases of discrimination, including racial discrimination (presumed race, skin colour, nationality, ancestry and ethnic origin), disability-based discrimination, philosophical/religious discrimination, sexual orientation, age, wealth, civil status, political beliefs, trade union membership, health, physical/genetic characteristics, birth and social background.
During 2018, UNIA observed growing anti-Semitic discrimination, with a staggering 94% of surveyed Belgians stating that they would have an issue with having a Jewish relative. Also, in 2018, UNIA published its report on employment-related discrimination in Belgium, which revealed that 27% of reports received pertaining to discrimination in the workplace are linked to racial discrimination and 20.7% are linked to disability-based discrimination.

**Major Religions (% of Population):** Although there is no official state census of religious affiliation in Belgium, estimates suggest a 60.7% Christian population (predominantly Roman Catholic but also including some Protestants and Orthodox Christians), 6% Muslims, and 0.4% Jewish.

**Muslim Population (% of Population):** Belgian Muslims constitute 6% of the overall population, with an estimated population size of 870,000.

**Main Muslim Community Organisations:** The Belgian Muslim Executive (Exécutive des Musulmans de Belgique/Executief van de Moslims van België – EMB) serves as the official national interlocutor on Islam and Muslim communities in the country (under the official recognition of Islam), comprising representatives from the federal regions. It oversees the registration of mosques and clergy, chaplains, Muslim/Islamic religious education teachers in state schools, ritual slaughter certificates, and announcing religious festivals among other key details in the function of Islam in Belgium.

**Main NGOs Combating Islamophobia:** CCIB, UNIA, ENAR, among others.

**Far Right Parties:** Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang – VB)

**Far Right Movements:** Katholiek Vlaams Hoogstudentenverbond, Nationalistische Studentenvereniging, Schild en Vrienden, and Voorpost.

**Far Right Terrorist Organisations:** Rather than organisations being directly designated as far right terrorist organisations, far-right actions tend to be condemned.

**Limitations of Islamic Practices**

- **Hijab Ban:** There is no national ban on wearing the headscarf in Belgium; however, regions and individual schools have the authority to prohibit schoolgirls from wearing the hijab.

- **Halal Slaughter Ban:** Serious proposals to prohibit ritual slaughter, including halal slaughter surfaced in Belgium during 2017. A ban on ritual slaughter in Flanders has been in operation since 1 January 2019 and will come into effect in Wallonia as of September 2019.

- **Minaret Ban:** There are no documented minaret bans in Belgium; however, discussion did follow the Swiss calls for such a ban during the early 2010s.

- **Circumcision Ban:** There is no formal legal ban on circumcision in Belgium, but there are ongoing calls to ban the practice.

- **Burka Ban:** A burka ban is in place since 1 June 2011. Those found wearing the burka in Belgian public spaces are subject to monetary fines of between
€15 and €25 and imprisonment of up to seven days. The national veil ban in Belgium is preceded by regional bans previously framed under the security narrative.

- **Prayer Ban:** There is no specific national or federal ban on prayer in Belgium. However, it is linked to employment discrimination cases.
Introduction

Perhaps unsurprisingly, against a backdrop of growing and increasingly normalised Islamophobia globally, during 2018, there has been a continued intensification of Islamophobia across Belgium. The nature and manifestations of Belgian Islamophobia are comparable and increasingly influenced by neighbouring Western European contexts, as reported in this report.

This year, in Belgium Islamophobia has continued to be influenced by migration debates and often intersects with more traditional forms of racism, for example see section on politics in this contribution related to the Marche contre Marrakech (March against Marrakech) which took place in December 2018.

Again, the most striking feature of Islamophobia in Belgium this year has been the continued deeply gendered manifestation of Islamophobia, both in the national hegemonic narrative but also in the occurrence of Islamophobic attacks. The annual report by the CCIB (Counter Islamophobia Collective in Belgium) published in 2018 reveals that 76% of Islamophobic attacks committed in Belgium are against Muslim women.

Notwithstanding, the Belgian civil society counter-Islamophobia response has been robust, albeit perhaps overstretched, in responding to the complexities of Islamophobia in the country. For example, there has been growing consideration of intersectional responses to the phenomenon. This work on countering Islamophobia in Belgium has been mirrored by Belgian academics. However, more is needed to counter the growth of populist and Islamophobic narratives and actions across the country.

Discussion of Islamophobic Incidents and Discursive Events

Physical and Verbal Attacks

As with previous years, physical and verbal Islamophobic attacks across Belgium have been numerous across 2018. For example, in August 2018, a mosque in Louvain was graffitied with a swastika, accompanied by calls for people to vote for the NVA and “dark-skinned people” to be expelled from the country. As discussed further in this contribution, the nature of the vandalism highlights the intersection of traditional racism with Islamophobia, and also its grounding in far-right discourses.

Also, as covered in previous years in the national reports on Belgium in the European Islamophobia Report, in 2018, Muslim women and in particular visibly Muslim women (i.e. those wearing the headscarf) have continued to be disproportionately affected and have faced the majority of reported physical and verbal Islamophobic attacks. In particular, the annual 2018 CCIB report states that 76% of the seventy compiled cases they dealt with in the preceding year impact-
ed Muslim women, compared to 24% affecting Muslim/perceived Muslim men in Belgium.¹

During 2018, Muslim women in the country reported verbal harassment attacked. For example, Cann’elles co-founder, Ihsane Houche, took to social media to report that whilst out walking with her young child she was verbally assaulted in May 2018 by a passer-by alleging that Houache “wanted to bring wars here”. The incident illustrates the amalgamation of the visible Muslim identity with Islamophobic narratives of an imagined violent threat posed by Muslims. Alternatively, media from Flanders report a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf being denied service at a café chain on the grounds of her perceived ethnic and religious identity. Or similarly, in February 2018, reports emerged of a visibly Muslim woman being denied service on local public transport in Brussels on the grounds of her headscarf.² The year 2018 has also seen several violent attacks perpetrated across the country; these include the violent attack on two Muslim women in Charleroi in February 2018, which resulted in one of the women having her headscarf forcibly removed,³ or the example of a young Muslim schoolgirl who had her scarf removed by an attacker during a school trip to Ostende in April 2018.⁴ Alternatively, the case of a nineteen-year-old Muslim woman being attacked by two individuals in Anderlues in July 2018; the attackers made racist and Islamophobic slurs, cut her with a sharp object and attempted to rape her, only to be dissuaded by the sound of passers-by. The event highlights the violent intersection of racism, Islamophobia and sexism in Belgian society. It led to significant community response and was taken up by local police (see Chronology section for details).

Employment
In 2018, UNIA reported that of all the discrimination cases reported to them in 2017, 572 were related to employment; this represents an increase of 13.5% on preceding years.⁵ These statistics indicate that in comparison with previous reported

years there has been an increase in employment-based discrimination in the country (or, perhaps, alternatively levels of discrimination remain constant but instead there is improved reporting by those facing prejudice in the labour force). Also based on this evidence, the CCIB found that 84% of the cases reported to UNIA specifically concerned Islamophobic discrimination. For example, the annual CCIB report published in 2018 details an example of a Muslim woman who worked at an airport in Belgium being denied access to sections of her workplace due to an alleged flawed claim of the woman having ‘radical’ links. The case was pursued by UNIA, CCIB, and the woman’s union but highlights the pervasive nature and impact of the Islamophobic narratives that frame Muslim communities as a source of violent threat.

It is important to note that in 2017 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled on two cases regarding the permissibility of the headscarf in the workplace: namely, in the cases of Achbita and Bounaoui. As highlighted previously within the scope of the European Islamophobia Report 2017, the ambiguity of these two cases and the ECJ rulings held the potential to set precedent and send the signal of the acceptability of the discrimination of visibly Muslim women working in Belgium, Europe, and beyond. Whilst it is difficult to assess the scope of the impact of the ECJ ruling one year on, it remains that the ruling may give a veil of legitimacy to discrimination of Muslim women. Additionally, it remains likely that the ruling shapes workplace Islamophobia and also Islamophobia in Belgium more broadly, especially given that we continue to see a rise in gendered Islamophobia across the nation.

**Education**

Whereas in previous years the field of education in the Belgian contribution of the European Islamophobia Report was marred with Islamophobic controversy surrounding young Muslim schoolgirls and their attire, 2018 has been comparatively less marked by scandal concerning the headscarf or long skirts (See previous editions of the national report on Belgium in the European Islamophobia Report for details). Instead, the primary source of Islamophobic tension in the education arena arose in relation to Muslim schoolchildren and fasting during the month of Ramadan. During May 2018, parents of fasting Muslim schoolchildren in Anderlecht were invited to take their children home during lunch breaks. The move potentially ostracises young Muslims observing Ramadan, rather than incorporating and celebrating the diversity of the student body.

Additionally, as highlighted under the section of this report pertaining to physical and verbal attacks in Belgium, a young Muslim schoolgirl from Brussels was verbally attacked and had her headscarf removed whilst on a school trip to Ostende.9

Politics
During 2018, there has been a continued growth and normalisation of Islamophobic narrative in the mainstream Belgian political arena. Perhaps the most prominent example of this stems from the Marche contre Marrakech in Brussels during December 2018. The protest was organised in response to the United Nations agreement surrounding migration. The event was scheduled to take place on Sunday, 16 December 2018 and was organised by a collective of far-right youth movements, including political branches and sociopolitical movements Katolieke Vlamms Hoogstudentenverbond (KVHV); Nationalistische Studentenvereniging (NSV); Schild en Vrienden (S&V); Voorpost; and Vlaams Belang Jogeren. The planned event came under fire and was prohibited by Brussels Mayor Philippe Close, but was strongly defended by its initiators. Filip Brusselmans, KVHV president deemed the event to be based on ‘freedom of expression’, and subsequently the Brussels ban was lifted. The protest resulted in clashes between protestors and the authorities, arrests and injured police officials. Protestors were interviewed saying “All the Arabs, all the Muslims, all the sh*t out!”10 - clearly demonstrating the racist and Islamophobic nature of the event and the amalgamation of the aforementioned with migration.

In addition to popularised far right sociopolitical movements and actions, the broader political arena too has seen a continuous presence of Islamophobia, for example as detailed further below, prominent Flemish politician, Bart de Wever, stoked intercommunity tensions and problematised the Arab and Muslim presence in the nation.

In addition, the Belgian political sphere also saw significant focus attributed to the so-called Belgian ‘Islam Party’, where Islam stands for Intégrité, Solidarité, Liberté, Authenticité and Moralité (Integrity, Solidarity, Freedom, Authenticity and Morality). The arguably more conservative and less representative views of the party gave rise to reactive Islamophobic discourse in Belgian politics. For example, NVA politician Theo Francken in April 2018 in response to the Islam Party stated,

“A party named ISLAM grown in Belgium. They shamelessly call for the introduction of Sharia. Sharia is a violation of human rights. Pro-Sharia parties are antidemocratic. Real wolves in sheep’s clothing #submission”11

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Although the party was problematic for most for numerous reasons, Francken’s comments risk an amalgamation of all Islamic values and Muslims as being antidemocratic and a threat to Belgian society, as many will omit the complexities of the issues at hand and consequently generalise.

Media

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been a continued intensification of Islamophobia in Belgium via the media. In their annual report published in 2018, the CCIB reported that 29% of the seventy cases it dealt with pertained to Islamophobia in the media and online. What is more, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg; for example, as detailed in the Chronology section, the media reported that covered a then potential Open VLD alderman’s, Alexander Billiet, remarks that areas within Forest (Brussels region) were Islamised. The story perpetuates the basis of the flawed Islamophobic narrative that Muslims wish to change the existing hegemonic cultural landscape and allegedly ‘Islamise’ the nation. This myth functions on the assumption that Muslims constitute a threat to the wider Belgian society.

Also, anti-Islamic media during the year was clearly linked to the so-called Islam Party. For example, Le Point ran a story in September 2018 with the headline “At the Heart of Islam: The Party That Wants to Install Sharia in Belgium”. Although, it is most likely that the headline refers to the self-proclaimed ‘Islam Party’, on first sight it appears that the headline generalises and makes the claim that Islam as a faith wants to instil Sharia in Belgium, something which is incorrect. Here the issue pertains to semantics and the assumptions and the generalisations readers will make upon seeing the headline.

12. Ibid.
Also, media similarly commented on the way in which during the Flemish programme “De Afspaark”, the ‘Islam Party’ representative, Redouane Ahrouche, would not look at NVA representative, Zuhal Demir, and the way in which he had incorrectly claimed that in twelve years, Belgium would have a Muslim majority - in parenthesis the article notes how the party leader was wrong rather than contributing to tensions and fears of Muslim demographic takeover.15


However, despite the reproduction of normalised Islamophobic narratives via the Belgian media, the press in Belgium has also begun to engage in a degree of reflexivity over the course of 2018. For example, in April 2018, Belgian media ran a report interrogating the extent to which it had an issue with racial difference\textsuperscript{18} – perhaps this is the first step towards media accountability and increased diversity. In addition, in comparison to previous years covered by the \textit{European Islamophobia Report}, there appears to have been increased reporting of physical and verbal Islamophobic attacks, especially those committed against Belgian Muslim women as detailed in this report. These stories have been covered across the spectrum of Belgian media, including \textit{dh.net}, RTBF, and La Capitale. Perhaps this broad coverage is largely attributable to the often politically centric leaning of the majority of newspaper outlets in the country.

\textbf{Justice System}

During the course of 2018, the Belgian justice system has continued to deal with legal cases pertaining to Islamophobia. In particular, examples include a ruling in July 2018 which deemed the prohibition of burkinis (framed under narratives of hygiene or security) as unacceptable.\textsuperscript{19} Or, in 2018, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that in a case dating back to 2007 whereby a judge prohibited a headscarf-wearing spectator into the courtroom, Belgium had contravened religious liberties,\textsuperscript{20} thus indicating the right of Muslim women who wear the hijab to access courtrooms. The continued apparent fixation on Muslim women’s dress in Belgium demonstrates the way in which much of the national imagination regarding Muslims and Islam in Belgium is reduced to and symbolised by visibly Muslim women.

In some cases, UNIA was able to intervene and facilitate favourable outcomes. For example, in the instance whereby a Muslim woman horse rider who had wanted to join a new club was rejected on the grounds of safety, UNIA was able to step in and create understanding between both parties.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, in the case of a fitness venue which had previously refused membership to a Belgian Muslim woman on the grounds of her headscarf, thanks to the intervention of UNIA, the venue has now adopted a clause of non-discrimination allowing Muslim women to join the health club and wear the hijab.\textsuperscript{22}

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Perhaps most worryingly, 2018 has seen the emergence of, or perhaps visible surfacing of, police racism and Islamophobia across the federal Belgian landscape. In particular, cases highlighted in the Belgian media include the internal police enquiry launched into the conduct of a Brussels West transport officer, who had allegedly made Islamophobic comments on his social media account;\(^\text{23}\) the dismissal of two metropolitan police officers following the receipt of thirteen complaints of racism;\(^\text{24}\) and the case of an officer from Heist-Op-Den-Berg, Antwerp, who was dismissed from the force and sentenced to 60 hours of community service for fabricating a letter containing false threats in the name of the so-called Islamic State, following the Paris attacks. Reports indicate that the letter may have been fabricated in order to stoke Islamophobic tensions in Belgium.\(^\text{25}\) The fact that these cases have become apparent in Belgium are most concerning for a number of reasons. Firstly, the police force should, in an ideal society, be seen as gatekeepers of the criminal justice system, in that they are likely to be the first responders in reported cases of physical or verbal Islamophobic attacks if there is an immediate report. The police force has the potential to influence, either consciously or subconsciously, the direction of pursuit of the case in question. Secondly, the highlighting of these cases also points to the potential existence of systematic and embedded racism and Islamophobia within the Belgian police force. Both issues paint an alarming picture of Belgian policing and Islamophobia and, in turn, have potential ramifications for the countering of Islamophobia in Belgium in the future.

**Internet**

In their annual report published in 2018, the CCIB points to the fact that 29% of reported Islamophobic incidents in the country pertain to Islamophobia in the media and online. In their annual report published in 2018, the CCIB details various examples of explicit Islamophobic comments made online.\(^\text{26}\) For example, the image below shows two of twelve cases highlighted in the CCIB report, both inciting hate against Muslims; the first calls for individuals to ‘mow them [Muslims] down as they exit their mosques’, whilst the second, presumably in an altercation with a presumed Muslim online, states ‘go hang from the minaret of your hateful mosque, waste of


humanity, parasite on society, dirty cockroach to be eradicated… dirty pig.'

Again, these examples represent the tip of the iceberg, particularly given the vastness of the online space. Nonetheless, the examples point to the mainstreaming and banalisation of Islamophobic hate speech in the virtual world.

The online sphere has also been influential in the coordination of wider Islamophobic activity within the nation, for example in the case of the Marche contre Marrakech which was attended by an estimated 5,500 individuals. Arguably, the anonymity afforded by the online arena creates an increased likelihood of expression of Islamophobia as there may be the perceived sense of impunity. In the same way that the Belgian media serves as a site of reproduction of a normalised national Islamophobic narrative, the Internet creates a reflection of society and its views.

However, the Internet also allows for the spreading and sharing of the range of counter-Islamophobia work currently pursued in Belgium. For instance, in honour of the young woman attacked in Anderlues, a community march was organised and publicised online. Likewise, the Internet permits the vast sharing of news stories

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27. Ibid.
detailing Islamophobia in the nation, thus sharing an understanding that Islamophobia is very much a real phenomenon in Belgium that affects real individuals.

Central Figures in the Islamophobia Network
Within the Belgian Islamophobia network, far right political parties and social movements have constituted the key figures in 2018. For example, in March 2018, NVA party leader, Bart de Wever, caused controversy in claiming that unlike the Jewish community in Belgium, the Belgian Muslim community created tension and conflicts through its insistence on the use of religious symbols and dress.\(^{30}\) The incoherent Islamophobic remarks by this far right political official further problematise visible Muslimness in society.

The Islamophobic narrative of the NVA sparks Islamophobic action. For example, in August 2018, a mosque in Louvain was graffitied with a swastika and calls to vote for the NVA,\(^{32}\) thus underlying the centrality of far right politics in the Belgian Islamophobic scene.


\(^{31}\) Ibid.

On a sociopolitical level, the KVHV has been significant in promoting and normalising Islamophobic discourse and action over the course of the year, specifically via their central role in the organisation of the *Marche contre Marrakech*. Whilst there has been a continued presence of central groups and individuals in the promotion of Islamophobia in Belgium during 2018, it must be noted that the issue is increasingly normalised and cannot be reduced to key actors alone.

In addition, in 2018, Steve Bannon announced that he intended to open a far-right think tank in Brussels. ‘The Movement’ was pitched as an alternative to Open Society and will offer generalised and campaign support to far-right political actors at the European level. The initiative follows Bannon’s meetings with prominent European right-wing figures such as Victor Orban, Marine Le Pen, and Nigel Farage, and has the support of Belgian politician Mischael Modriken of the ADDE group. The group’s presence highlights the increasingly globalised nature of Islamophobia.

**Observed Civil Society and Political Assessment and Initiatives**

Belgian civil society continues to mount a robust counter-Islamophobia movement across the country. Key players in this response in the Belgian arena include (but are not limited to) the CCIB, ENAR and UNIA. Examples of their prominent counter-Islamophobia activity during 2018 include offering victim support or bringing forward complaints regarding Islamophobia in the media at the national level. Given the nature of Belgian political and social structures, these initiatives are on the whole well-received by the wider public and well-respected in the political sphere.

33. Ibid.
In addition to the activity led at, or in conjunction with, the grass-roots level in Belgium, 2018 also saw the culmination of the Counter Islamophobia Kit project, led by the University of Leeds. The case study of Belgium constituted a major component of the project. In September 2018, a national workshop on countering Islamophobia in Belgium was held and brought together key academics, civil society activists, and policymakers from the country. The workshop provided a space for the discussion of effective counter-Islamophobia strategies within the framework of Belgium, and arguably represents in itself a form of best practice in the wider combatting of Islamophobia in Belgium.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In conclusion, during 2018, Islamophobia in Belgium has continued to grow steadily. This steady intensification of Islamophobia is comparable with the nature of the phenomenon during 2017 and differs from the clustered Islamophobic attacks seen in 2015 and 2016. This stable escalation of Belgian Islamophobia in 2018 has been marked by the continuation of Islamophobia in the virtual realm, media, education and employment. Additionally, during this year, there has been the noticeable highlighting of Islamophobia in the police force – the frontline of the Belgian justice system. Also, the influence of the far right political and sociopolitical Islamophobic narrative has been keenly felt – and particularly apparent in the Marche contre Marrakech and the generalised normalisation of populist Islamophobic ideas.

Gendered dimensions of Islamophobia in Belgium have continued to intensify and are among the most remarkable features of overall Islamophobia in Belgium in 2018. Muslim women have faced widespread Islamophobic aggressions, which vary from verbal attacks to abhorrent violence. Notwithstanding, it appears that during 2018 there has been increased mainstreaming reporting of the phenomenon. This, however, does not detract from the seriousness of the situation or the urgency for a coherent response. Based on the aforementioned points the following recommendations are imperative:

• Given the distinctly gendered dimensions of Islamophobia there must be increased mainstream documentation of the levels of hostility faced by Belgian Muslim women. This recognition is the first step in the process of highlighting that there is in fact an issue that must be collectively addressed. With regards to documentation, best practices apparent in groups such as UNIA, CCIB or ENAR, among others, must be championed.

• There must be a collective breaking down of the popular myths surrounding Muslim women and increased support of Muslim women facing Islam-

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Islamophobia. Civil society movements represent potentially fruitful avenues in this regard.

- A clear governmental and legal position on the acceptability of Muslim women’s dress is necessary – rather than allowing for ambiguity, controversy and furthering of the reductionist narratives surrounding Muslim women in Belgium.
- Clear nationwide condemnation of far right and generalised Islamophobic narrative and actions must be pursued. Instead Muslim presence and contribution to Belgian society must continue to be highlighted and celebrated.
- Continued awareness raising and support of the effective Islamophobia reporting and support of channels such as CCIB, ENAR and UNIA.
- Increase of the range of safe spaces and opportunities to discuss and collectively work on effective counter-Islamophobia strategies.

Chronology

- **02.01.2018**: Internal enquiry opened by Brussel West police to investigate Islamophobic remarks on Facebook by a chief inspector within the force responsible for public transport security.36
- **12.01.2018**: Black Muslim woman refused service in a Panos café, Flanders. The case highlights the intersection of racism, Islamophobia and gendered discrimination in Belgium.
- **19.02.2018**: Muslim woman who wore a headscarf refused access to a De Lijn bus in Brussels.37
- **20.02.2018**: In Charleroi, two Muslim women attacked in front of two-year old infant, both verbally, and one had her headscarf removed. Perpetrators were driving a small French registered vehicle, possibly suggesting that the attackers may not have been Belgian. The women were left in shock and injured. Reports indicate that passers-by did not intervene during the attack, nor report it to the local police.38

• **21.03.2018:** Two police officers from Antwerp are dismissed for racism.\(^{39}\)

• **23.03.2018:** Headscarf-wearing, women's indoor football team in Laeken, Brussels faces controversy for a second time on the grounds of the official permissibility of their hijabs in the game. Although the match was played, it was deemed that because of the Muslim women's dress, it would not officially count. The team reported their complaints to UNIA.\(^{40}\)

• **18.03.2018:** Bart de Wever, president of the NVA, interviewed in *De Zonday* newspaper makes Islamophobic remarks problematising Muslim attire in line with acceptance of Belgian norms.\(^{41}\)

• **04.04.2018:** 16-year-old Muslim schoolgirl from Molenbeek is attacked, with her headscarf being pulled off by a man whilst on a school trip to Ostende.\(^{42}\)

• **15.05.2018:** Ihsance Houache, co-founder of the organisation formerly known as *Bruxelloise et Voilée*, now *Cann’elles*, reports being threatened by a woman with two dogs in Brussels. The attackers accused Houache of ‘wanting to bring war here’, thus highlighting a flawed conflation between visible ‘Muslimness’ with violence and security narratives.

• **25.05.2018:** Parents of Muslim students fasting during the month of Ramadan at the Ecole Maurice Carême in Anderlecht are invited to take their children home during lunch breaks. This move stands to forcibly ostracise practicing Muslim students.\(^{43}\)

• **01.06.2018:** Pew Research report published under the title ‘What Do Europeans Really Think of Islam?’ The report reveals that of the fifteen countries surveyed, Belgians are most opposed to immigration, 91% would have a problem with Muslim neighbours, and 77% would have a problem with having a Muslim family member.\(^{44}\)

• **14.06.2018:** UNIA annual report published; highlights centrality of religious discrimination in the workplace.

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\(^{41}\) *“Les Propos De Bart De Wever”.*


\(^{44}\) *“Que Pensent Les Européens De L’islam?”, La Libre, 1 June 2018, https://www.lalibre.be/actu/international/que-pensent-les-europeens-de-l-islam-5b11018c5532858b927374cf, (Access date: 2 September 2019).*
13.07.2018: Courts rule that it is impermissible for public swimming pools to ban Muslim women from wearing a burkini. The case specifically dealt with complaints stemming from Ter Wallen, Merelbeke and Van Eyck, Grand and explicitly outlined that the burkini could not be prohibit even on grounds of security or hygiene, as alluded to in previous debates. 45

19.07.2018: A police officer, from Heist-Op-Den-Berg in Antwerp is dismissed and sentenced to 60 hours of community service for fabricating a letter containing false threats in the name of the so-called Islamic State, following the Paris attacks. Reports indicate that the letter may have been fabricated in order to stoke Islamophobic tensions in Belgium. 46

02.07.2018: A nineteen-year-old Muslim woman is attacked and faced an attempted rape in Anderlues. The attackers made racist and Islamophobic comments to the victim. The attack highlights the intersection of ethnicity, gender and Islamophobia. 47

11.08.2018: Two perpetrators of the Anderlues Islamophobic attack on young Muslim woman arrested.

14.08.2018: A man in his fifties is sentenced following his attack on a Muslim woman outside of a mosque in Liège.

30.08.2018: A Muslim woman has her headscarf forcibly removed in a parking lot in the Brussels Schaerbeek area. 48

31.08.2018: A mosque in Louvain is graffitied with a swastika, calls for people to vote for NVA and “dark-skinned people” to be expelled. 49

07.09.2018: CCIB annual report for the preceding year is published related to seventy cases. The report reveals the distinct gendered nature of Belgian Islamophobia with 76% of reports pertaining to Islamophobia affecting women, compared to 24% affecting men. Also, the report highlights

the principle domains of Islamophobia in Belgium with 29% of reports pertaining to Islamophobia in the media, 17% life and society, 16% education, 14% employment, and 8% politics.50

- **08.09.2018:** Subsequent to the CCIB report, RTL publishes an article underlining that on average one reported Islamophobic attack is committed every two days in Belgium.51
- **18.09.2018:** ECJ reports that not to allow a headscarf-wearing woman into the courtroom as a spectator, as was the case in Belgium in 2007, contravenes European Human Rights legislation.52
- **26.09.2018:** Five Belgian Muslim organisations submit an official complaint regarding GAIA, the prominent Belgian animal rights activist organisation, alleging racist targeting of halal slaughter.53
- **12.10.2018:** A banner at the European Parliament commenting on controlled immigration juxtaposed with images of visibly Muslim women is removed, following formal complaints from European Parliamentary staff and Belgian Muslim activists, including Julie Pascoët of ENAR.
- **18.10.2018:** *La Capitale* runs a media story claiming regarding an alderman claiming that Forest is becoming increasingly ‘Islamised’. The story fits within the scheme of growing narratives concerning and alleged Muslim takeover of the nation.
- **11.12.2018:** UNIA reports on the case of two horse riders, one of whom wore a headscarf, being denied access to their local riding centre due to the suggestion that wearing a headscarf would interfere with wearing a safety helmet. UNIA successfully intervened and now the women are permitted to join the club.54
- **16.12.2018:** The *Marche contre Marrakech* takes place in Brussels. The protest was organised by the Belgian far right, including Filip Brusselmans of

the KVHV. The event was banned by Belgian authorities, including the Brussels Bourgmestre\textsuperscript{55} Philippe Close. The march was framed as being a response to the UN pact signed previously in Marrakech and as a counter-migration action; however, the event had distinct anti-Arab and Islamophobic undertones.\textsuperscript{56} The march was countered by anti-fascist marches on the same day.

\textsuperscript{55} The Bourgmestre is locally nominated to office within local politics, and is responsible for local political affairs and maintenance. Although different, the role is perhaps most similar to that of ‘mayor’ in the anglophone context.
