“For them it is just a story, for me it is my life.”

Ethnography and the Security Gaze

Academic Research with “Salafi” Muslims in the Netherlands

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Abstract

In this article I reflect upon my own work on Salafism in the Netherlands, particularly with militant activists, in order to think through some of the ethical and methodological dilemmas that arose throughout the research when many of my interlocutors left for Syria to join Jahbat al-Nusra and/or IS(IS). This culminated in my becoming a witness and an Expert Witness at a trial, testifying against several of my known contacts. After introducing this research and outlining my experiences in court, I set out to show how academic knowledge about Salafism and militant activism is used in a process of racialised categorisation and closure. This article contributes to critical reflections on the positionalities of social scientists and of social science in public in a context of racial securitisation and politicisation.

Keywords

Salafism – the Netherlands – positionality – foreign fighters – activism – militancy – Expert Witness – ethics

1 Introduction¹

In April 2015, I travelled to The Hague to pick up a package that Khalid, one of my interlocutors, wanted to give to me personally. After arriving, I waited

¹ This article builds upon and expands on Martijn de Koning, “Ethnographie und der Sicherheitsblick: Akademische Forschung mit ‘salafistischen’ Muslimen in den Niederlanden”,

outside the station and he came to me with a plastic bag that contained the transcript of the series of interviews I had conducted with him over a period of six days some months earlier. I had given the transcript to him to read through and, if necessary, to correct. "I trust you with this," he said, and told me he would never have gone into such detail with a journalist or anyone else: "For them it is just a story, for me it is my life." I took this as a call to be careful with his words, but perhaps even more importantly, to reflect upon what we as researchers are actually doing with (or to) people's lives.

Khalid was part of a network of friends, militant activists and pro-IS supporters who moved around in various circles of people who affiliated themselves with a Salafi way of understanding Islam. Much has been written about the subject of Salafism and, increasingly, this research has an empirical basis and takes into account the subjective views of men and women regarding their beliefs and the world in which they practise their religion. But is a focus on the subjective views of so-called Salafi Muslims themselves enough? Why, and to what end, do we want to know their subjective views? In focusing on their subjective voices, which is indeed necessary, should we not also go beyond them, interrogating and teasing out the reasons why people want to know more about Salafism and what that means for the academic knowledge we gather and disseminate? In this article, I shall take these questions as a starting point to expand upon the consequences of the politicisation of the research field. I shall also respond to Richard Gauvain's observation that, in the field of Salafism research, "It is strikingly unusual to find ethnographers of Salafism taking account of their own positions when writing up their research practices or demonstrating sufficient awareness of their own contributions in shaping their research findings."² This article therefore fits into a series of on-going attempts, one might call it struggles, to come to terms with several ethical and methodological dilemmas that emerged during my work on Salafism and with militant activists, work that culminated in my becoming an Expert Witness at a trial, testifying against several of my known contacts. It was the experience

in Schirin Amir-Moazami (ed.), *Der inspizierte Muslim: Zur Politisierung der Islamforschung in Europa* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018), pp. 335-366. The research on which this article is based is part of the "Forces that bind and/or divide" project undertaken by the University of Amsterdam's Department of Anthropology and funded by NWO (Dutch Research Council) and the Project Islamic Mission (PIM) of the Department of Islamic Studies at Radboud University, Nijmegen, which was partly funded by the Ministry of Security and Justice. Many thanks to Schirin Amir-Moazami, Riem Spielhaus, the editors of this special issue and the anonymous reviewers for their critical and inspiring comments on earlier versions of this article.

2 Richard Gauvain, "Just Admit It Man, You're a Spy!" Fieldwork Explorations into the Notion of Salafi 'Oppositionality', *Fieldwork in Religion* 13/2 (2018): 203-230, p. 205.

of participating in the court case (in the hearings and in writing the Expert Witness report), that prompted me to question how academic knowledge about “Salafism” and activism is used both inside and outside these trials. This article therefore also contributes to the ongoing debates within academia about the genealogies and definitions of the term “Salafism”³ by showing how they become entangled with local and global power struggles and how complex and often messy legal and political issues contribute to the way people understand Salafism.

After briefly introducing the research on militant activists and the dilemmas that accompanied it, I shall discuss the court case. First, I shall introduce the setting by describing my experiences and feelings in the courtroom. Then I go on to show how academic knowledge about Salafism and militant activism is used in a process of categorisation and closure that produces hermetically sealed categories. In the subsequent sections, I shall trace how this particular use of categorisation and closure is related to the process of the racialisation of danger and securitisation of Islam and, furthermore, how academic research in general is part and parcel of that process. In doing so, I aim to contribute to a critical reflection on the positionalities of anthropologists and of anthropology in public⁴ within a state that is focused on maximising security and minimising risk, especially when working with groups that are feared or despised, and often treated as “repugnant others”.⁵ In particular, by focusing on the various uses of the Salafism label in relation to my changing positionality in the field, I also intend to contribute to more recent discussions about state power, academic freedom and knowledge production in relation to the ethics of research on conflict, militant activism and violence.⁶

3 See for example, Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: Hurst, 2009); Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Bernard Rougier, *Qu'est ce que le salafisme?* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

4 Didier Fassin, “Why Ethnography Matters: On Anthropology and Its Publics”, *Cultural Anthropology* 28 (2013): 621–646.

5 Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other”, *Social Research* 58 (1991): 373–393.

6 See also Narzanin Massoumi, Tom Mills, and David Miller, “Secrecy, Coercion and Deception in Research on ‘Terrorism’ and ‘Extremism’”, *Contemporary Social Science* (2019) DOI: 10.1080/21582041.2019.1616107; Annelies Moors, “The Trouble with Transparency: Reconnecting Ethics, Integrity, Epistemology, and Power”, *Ethnography* 20 (2019): 149–169.

2 Research in a Securitising and Politicising Field: The Militant Activism of Muslims in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany

In 2007, I started my research among Dutch Muslims who visited the so-called “Salafi” Islamic centres in the Netherlands. That research focused on how Muslims acquire a sense of what Islam “really says” by visiting and taking part in the activities carried out at these Salafi centres,⁷ and was an extension of my PhD research, in which I looked at how Moroccan-Dutch Muslim teenagers—both boys and girls—attempted to construct what they called a “pure Islam”.⁸ My PhD research on that topic started in 1999. In my discussions with colleagues and policy makers at the time, many thought that Islam would be a thing of the past. Moroccan-Dutch youth were, some proposed, destined to become less religious once they were more integrated into Dutch society. Hence the remark of one official at the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs in 1999: “Come on, who is interested in Moroccan youth and Islam?”

Since then things have changed. Islam, after 9/11, has become a topic of national debates in the Netherlands and all kinds of policies related to integration, social cohesion, multiculturalism and security are fiercely argued. This politicisation of Islam probably became clearest during my third project, which I conducted with Ineke Roex, Carmen Becker and Pim Aarns, focusing on the nature and working methods used by Muslim militant activist groups in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium.⁹ In our work, we explained how militant activists attempted to put other ways of living—differing from those propagated by the state, media and mainstream Muslim organisations—into practice and assert alternative answers to the question of what constitutes a “good Muslim”.

The Dutch activists we studied did not resort to political violence in the Netherlands but several did aggressively disturb public debates in the Netherlands and Belgium, tried to go to Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Chechnya to join the violent struggles in 2005 and 2008, and supported Al

7 Martijn de Koning, “I’m a Weak Servant’: The Question of Sincerity and the Cultivation of Weakness in the Lives of Dutch Salafi Muslims”, in D. Beekers and D. Kloos (eds), *Straying from the Straight Path: How Senses of Failure Invigorate Lived Religion* (New York: Berghahn, 2018), pp. 37–53.

8 Martijn de Koning, *Zoeken naar een “zuivere” islam: Geloofsbeleving en identiteitsvorming van jonge Marokkaans-Nederlandse moslims* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).

9 Martijn de Koning, Carmen Becker and Ineke Roex, *Islamic Militant Activism in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany: “Islands in a Sea of disbelief”* (London: Palgrave, 2020, forthcoming).

Qaeda verbally. Our research started in 2011 and, by January 2013, it became apparent that many of the activists had left for Syria to join the fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. All of these departures attracted an enormous amount of media attention in the Netherlands; they have been the subject of questions in parliament, the threat level of terrorism has increased,¹⁰ and the activists are closely monitored by the intelligence and security services. In addition, the attraction the activists hold for young Muslims became a key consideration in governmental anti-radicalisation policy.

After this shift, we maintained our research focus on the dynamics of activism in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands in order to capture and understand the complexities of the lives of these people and of their activism. However, we had to adapt our methodologies and public strategies because in all three case studies, we were forced to clarify and make explicit our position not only to our interlocutors and their opponents among Muslims, but also to the state's agencies. In the Dutch case, I tried to continue my fieldwork as I had done before: attending public meetings, talking with people on social media and sometimes being present at demonstrations, leisure activities and dinners. My long-standing presence in these networks and acquaintance with some individuals since 2006, as well as their eagerness to get their message out to the public in which I could be an interesting channel, resolved most of the issues regarding privacy (as many were very protective of their families) and "oppositionality"¹¹ against unbelievers. Although some initially had doubts when I told them the research was partly funded by the Ministry of Security and Justice ("You could be from the security services," one said), those doubts appeared to have gradually faded away. However, as a result of my presence, the police and the Public Prosecutor did not trust me anymore and were convinced that I was too close to the activists.¹² This became an idea or allegation that would return quite often: I was accused of being an apologist, given that many commentators regarded the militants as terrorists and Jihadi-Salafis. In contrast, we did not label them as such. Instead, we included the process of labelling them as radicals by the media and the state as part of our analysis.¹³

10 The Dutch state uses a system of threat levels to publicly announce the estimated chance of a terrorist attack. Every quarter, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism publishes the current threat level for the Netherlands.

11 Gauvain "Just Admit It".

12 Information from informal contacts in the police and Department of Justice.

13 De Koning, Becker, and Roex *Islamic Militant Activism*.

3 Researcher in Court and Out of Place

After seven of my interlocutors were arrested in 2014 to face trial (the so-called Context-trial), the court appointed me as an Expert Witness. The trial was planned for September 2015 and I was asked to write a report responding to specific questions about the defendants that had been drawn up by the counsel for the defence and the Public Prosecutor. In total, the Context trial involved eight male defendants and one female defendant, each of whom was accused of forming a criminal organisation with terrorist intent, incitement to hatred and terrorism, recruitment specifically for Jabhat al-Nusra and IS(IS) and some of whom were charged with participating in the fighting themselves. The press called it the "largest terrorism trial in the Netherlands", although most of the defendants were not accused of violent acts and none of them were engaged in political violence in the Netherlands.¹⁴ Although my analysis in this article focuses primarily on my positionality in the field of Salafism research and, in particular during the Context trial in relation to other stakeholders, it is important to discuss my own impressions in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of what happened.

Since I was not only an Expert Witness but also called as a witness, and social scientists have no legal professional privilege, I was obliged to testify in court. This raised a number of issues for me in relation to the "do no harm" principle. Who should be protected in this situation? As the defendants were accused of committing serious crimes related to terrorism, I considered the act of testifying to be an ethical responsibility for a researcher, as it serves the common good. Furthermore, not testifying could be interpreted by some as condoning the actions the defendants were accused of, while at the same time harming the defendants by failing to present evidence which, in some cases, could have exonerated them from some of the charges. Testifying, however, might also be harmful to the defendants, as the consequences could never be fully anticipated. I decided that the best course of action would be to request permission from the defendants who took part in my research to discuss anything I knew about them; this I obtained via their lawyers.

14 For a critical perspective on the Context trial and other so-called terrorism trials, see Beatrice de Graaf, "Foreign Fighters on Trial: Sentencing Risk, 2013-2017", in Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning and Francesco Ragazzi (eds), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 97-131.

Before the public trial, I was heard in two closed sessions and, during the trial, in two public sessions, each of which took about seven hours. Two of my colleagues, at my request, were amongst the audience during the public sessions to provide me with critical feedback, and other colleagues reviewed and commented upon my Expert Witness Report prior to its submission to court. I was scheduled to testify on the first two days. Nervous and anxious about performing well in the court room, I decided to book a room in a hotel nearby so that I did not have to travel or worry about being on time. The next day, as I was entering the court room and taking my seat at the designated place, I was acutely aware of a sense of not really belonging there. Here I was, sitting right on front of the judges about 4 metres away, with on their right (to the left from my position) the two officers from the Public Prosecutor's Office. Right next to me, and behind me, were the defendants with their lawyers and some observers in the back row. The general public and press were behind them, in a room separated from us by a glass panel. So, I had to address the judge and the Public Prosecutor about my interlocutors, who were sitting next to me and behind me, but I was not able to talk to them. It appeared to me that this action (talking about one's interlocutors to a third party when the interlocutors themselves were present) was a violation of the ethics of ethnographic research (or maybe any kind of qualitative research) and my discomfort steadily grew.

The setting then made me realise that I was no longer in control of the situation. Although this feeling was not new to me in this particular research project (for example, during a police crackdown on a football game between interlocutors, I remained with the interlocutors and was unable to change the situation and protect myself), it made me more uncomfortable than ever before. I knew there was much at stake here: the lives of my interlocutors, the fight against terrorism by the Public Prosecutor and my reputation as a researcher in relation to the interlocutors, the Public Prosecutor, the court and the media.

During my testimony and interrogation, the Public Prosecutor questioned my objectivity and distance, especially after I twice refused to disclose the identity of the maker of a short film about one of the demonstrations that the activists had organised. This was a troubling situation to be in, particularly as the court is allowed to take into custody a witness who does not provide information it deems relevant (or refuses to testify at all). Fortunately, on second questioning, I was able to convince the court that the maker was not among the defendants, and so they decided to let it go. Other questions, particularly those related to whether I was Muslim or not, made me feel very uncomfortable, as did the Public Prosecutor's allegations about my lack of impartiality and about my being too close to the defendants. What was the Public Prosecutor trying

to do here? Was he putting me in, and reducing me to, one or several of those “ready to wear”¹⁵ identities and then subsequently throwing my research in the dustbin? The Public Prosecutors told me later, during a break, that I should not take their comments personally: “It is part of the game.” I realised that I was indeed taking things personally. Throughout my research and during my testimony in court I had tried to present myself as an academic. After all, my views were based upon, and sustained by, evidence and thoroughness. In this way I instrumentalised “the academic” as a different “ready to wear” position imbued with specific criteria, demands and expectations.¹⁶ Or in Naoki Sakai’s words, the position of the academic is “tied to the concept of persona or mask, because it is a modality of staging—a presentation of the self—addressed to other personae in a given configuration”.¹⁷ The position I tried to take up, the academic, became a positionality and a “mask” through which I tried to protect myself as well as to present myself to other people: my interlocutors, the journalists, policy makers and the Public Prosecutors. Yet, by challenging me for “being too close” to the defendants, it was also exactly my status as an academic that was being attacked. However, as we shall see in the next section, the Public Prosecutor’s team also relied upon my work in its arguments.

At the end of the trial, six of the eight male defendants were convicted of being members of a criminal organisation with terrorist intent and received sentences ranging from three to six years imprisonment. One of the male defendants was convicted of incitement (43 days), and another who participated in a training camp in Syria was also convicted of incitement (155 days imprisonment and six months’ probation). The female defendant was convicted for retweeting a tweet that was regarded as inciting people to violence and was sentenced to seven days imprisonment. During the appeal, which took place in 2018, the court upheld most of the accusations and conclusions, though the sentences were somewhat reduced in most cases because of the length of the procedure and the time some defendants had spent detained in the Terrorism Department – the maximum-security section of two Dutch prisons. Two defendants received prison sentences of five years and six months and another received five years and three months, all of which were unconditional. One defendant received a prison sentence of 11 months, with three of those months conditional, while another received ten months youth detention. The final

15 Jennifer Robertson, “Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on ‘Positionality’”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2002): 785–792.

16 Robertson, “Reflexivity Redux”, pp. 788–789.

17 Naoki Sakai, “Positions and Positionalities: After Two Decades”, *Positions* 20/1 (2012): 67–94, p. 70.

defendant received a three-year prison sentence and two years' probation. I was happy that the judges were very positive about my expertise and which they expressed in their verdict. This could be taken as a form of vindication but, to be honest, it also served as a way for the judges to argue in favour of their verdict, for which they relied in part on my testimony. The defendants and their friends, needless to say, were not amused about my role but neither were they very hostile. One of the friends however said to me, "Ok, I know you did do nothing wrong, but tell me, why would we ever talk to you again?"

4 The Context trial: Salafism and Closure

In the analysis below, I shall focus mostly on the first trial and more specifically, on the Public Prosecutor's role, as I have attended almost all the sessions of that trial. As Beatrice de Graaf has made clear in her work on Dutch terrorism trials—including the Context Trial—it is not only the charges related to actual violent crimes committed that determine the outcome of the trial, but also the *potential* for terrorist violence in the Netherlands or in Syria.¹⁸ One indicator of such a risk was Salafism and more specifically, Salafi-Jihadism or Jihadism. During the Context trial, the Public Prosecutor made a distinction between Islam and "Jihadism" to make it absolutely clear that what was on trial was neither Islam nor Muslims in general (as the defendants' lawyers claimed). Also, the courts made it explicit that the focus of the trial and the verdict was not on Islam in general or religious convictions and religiosity. As the appellate court phrased it:

Whether or not there is or was a question of religious beliefs is not for the court to judge. But it is abundantly clear that no religious belief can serve to legitimise terror, and that active disseminators of an ideology that calls for and leads to lethal violence against fellow human beings can be accused in law. That is why it is not the religious beliefs of the defendant that are up for debate here, but the way in which—through expressions of the defendant and his co-defendants—the violent ideology of the aforementioned terror groups were spread, is.¹⁹

¹⁸ De Graaf, "Foreign Fighters".

¹⁹ For the verdict at the first trial, see: <http://deeplink.rechtspraak.nl/uitspraak?id=ECLI:NL:RBDHA:2015:14365>. For the appeal, see: <http://deeplink.rechtspraak.nl/uitspraak?id=ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2018:1248> (accessed 21 February 2019).

Nevertheless, attempting to explain and convince the court of the danger these defendants posed, the Public Prosecutor explicitly targeted their ideology, classifying it as Salafism and more specifically, Jihadism, which it described as "the most extreme current of Salafism".²⁰ At the same time, although ultimately less convincingly for the court, some of the defendants argued the opposite, dismissing the labelling altogether or arguing that they were activists.

The Public Prosecutor, the lawyers and defendants all relied upon my Expert Witness report for their arguments. The denials by the defendants were interpreted by the Public Prosecutor as being:

characteristic of the Salafi current. Salafists do not call themselves "Salafist", but "Muslim" or "pure Muslim". In doing so, they are able on the one hand to reach out to a larger audience, but on the other they also create the impression that their influence extends beyond their own constituency.²¹

This line of reasoning, was based on another idea the Public Prosecutor had put forward, the concept of *taqiyya* (dissimulation). As far as reaching a verdict was concerned, the issue of *taqiyya* was never referred to by the judges and therefore did not appear to be very important or relevant. However, it is worthy of further exploration, given that it demonstrates how academic knowledge is merged with other types of knowledge in order to create hermetically-sealed categories, which was important in reaching a verdict.

The prosecution team asserted that the statements and behaviour of the defendants were at odds with the explanations they gave throughout the trial about their ideology. The explanation that the prosecution team gave was: "The extremist ideology consists of the notion 'taqiyya'."²² According to them, *taqiyya* referred to the practice of hiding a religious conviction in situations where, if revealed, religious conviction could lead to danger or death. Yarden Mariuma explains how the term is used in so many different contexts, from so many different angles and based upon so many different interests, that it has become obfuscated in ambiguity.²³ In his plea, the prosecutor referred to a publication

20 Public Prosecutor's presentation (PPCs), Part II, p. 23. The written text is in the possession of the author.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 22.

23 Yarden Mariuma, "Taqiyya as Polemic, Law and Knowledge: Following an Islamic Legal Term through the Worlds of Islamic Scholars, Ethnographers, Polemicists and Military Men", *The Muslim World* 104 (2014): 89-108.

of the Belgian intelligence services written by Jeroen de Keyser.²⁴ When discussing the concept of *taqiyya*, de Keyser refers to the entry on “Dissimulation” in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an* and to a publication by Andrew Campbell in which *taqiyya* is described as the way “Islamic extremists deceive the West”.²⁵ Campbell also attempts to show that *taqiyya* has its roots in early Islamic thought (referring to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) quoting, among others, a definition by Bernard Lewis:²⁶

The term *taqiyya*, caution, precaution, denotes an Islamic concept of dispensation—the idea that under compulsion or menace, a believer may be dispensed from fulfilling certain conditions of religion ... It was used to justify the concealment of beliefs likely to arouse the hostility of the authorities or the populace.

Campbell tries to clarify how this informs both Sunni and Shia thought (even though *taqiyya* was originally a Shia doctrine) and to show that it has “developed as an art form of deception”²⁷ performed by all Muslims, rendering them inherently untrustworthy. This is different from the way the Public Prosecutor applied the term to jihadists only, but there are, nevertheless, several aspects that are important for understanding the significance of what happened during the trial, aspects which illustrate the ways in which *taqiyya* is used as an identity marker and a device for rhetorical closure. First of all, defendants in a court case are not obliged to speak the truth (unlike witnesses, for example). The prosecutor did not, therefore, need to refer to *taqiyya* to point out the contradictions between statements made by the defendants at different points during the trial. The fact that he chose to do so underlines his concern to impose a particular ideological categorisation on the defendants, explaining their behaviour through his own view of this ideology, even if (or especially when) this did not fit from the onset. Second, the use of the concept of *taqiyya* racialises deception, formulating it as a typically Islamic feature of Muslims. As Sindre Bangstad explains, *taqiyya* is a central tenet of Islamophobic literature, which describes it as being the use of “lies” and “deception” to hide Muslims’ “true” intentions—namely, to infiltrate “Western” countries in order

24 Jeroen de Keyser, “Een Schadelijke Sektarische Bedreiging Onderzocht: Takfirisme”, *Cahiers Inlichtingenstudies BISC* 4 (2014): 37-69.

25 Andrew Campbell, “Taqiyyah: How Islamic Extremists Deceived the West”, *National Observer* 65 (2005): 11-23, p. 11.

26 Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25.

27 Campbell, “Taqiyyah”, p. 16.

to establish global Islamic rule, even to the point of hiding every reference to the Islamic faith in the process. The Islamophobic variant of the *taqiyya* argument is a form of closure because it presumes a narrative that is totalising in its effects: there are no Muslims who can be trusted.²⁸

Finally, the relationship between academic knowledge and Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon, as Mariuma has shown.²⁹ The study of *taqiyya* by Ignatius Goldziher³⁰ is regarded by many as *the* text upon which others have built their theories. Mariuma illustrates how Ignaz Goldziher refers to the "famed racist philosopher Gobineau (1866)", who discussed the Kitman phenomenon ("lying by omission"). According to Gobineau, lying is shameful for Westerners while for "Asiatiques" it is the contrary: one can trick, deceive and betray, and even feel superior in doing so. As Mariuma notes, the reference to Goldziher reappears in many publications (including the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, to which de Keyser refers), but without any mention of Gobineau.³¹

While in many Islamophobic texts the notion of *taqiyya* is used to cast a suspicious light on large groups of Muslims, the Public Prosecutor used this reference to *taqiyya* to make the claim that the defendants were involved in Jihadism and, furthermore, that "this ideology delineates the context of the behaviours, which may be punishable".³² Yet, it is through the circular use of the "*taqiyya*-argument" that the Public Prosecutor created hermetically sealed categories by ascribing a set of characteristics to the defendants that are then constructed as inherent in them because of their religious traits and identities. The actions of the defendants were evidence of their affiliation with Salafi Jihadism, as were their denials (through the *taqiyya* argument). The Prosecutor used my Expert Witness Report and the research of others to show that he and the court should regard Salafi Jihadism as the element that defined the group as an organisation and as the lens through which their actions should be interpreted and judged (terrorist intent).³³

28 Sindre Bangstad, "The Racism That Dares Not Speak Its Name: Rethinking Neo-Nationalism and Neo-Racism in Norway", *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1 (2016): 49-65.

29 Mariuma, "Taqiyya".

30 Ignaz Goldziher, "Das Prinzip der Takija im Islam", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 60 (1906): 213-226.

31 Mariuma, "Taqiyya", p. 91.

32 PPCS, p. 3

33 Verdict. Note 53. Please give a more precise reference.

5 Academia and a Racialised Security Gaze

The Context trial is, I suggest, indicative of a broader trend in public debates about Muslims and Islam: the racialisation of danger, which points to Muslims as the Dangerous Other and turns Islam into a matter of state security. And, the work of academics may, whether they agree or not, contribute to that racialisation, leading to large groups of Muslims being regarded as “a risk” or “at risk” with regard to radicalisation.

It is by now a commonplace argument that 9/11 was a pivotal moment in world history and that society reacted by scrutinising Islam and Muslims much more closely. However, in the Netherlands prior to 9/11, a high level of scrutiny was already being directed towards migrants from Muslim majority countries. As early as the 1970s, Islam was categorised as alien and Muslims as outsiders who needed to be integrated and posed a potential risk to social cohesion. This way of thinking began to extend even to second- and third-generation Dutch Muslims. During the 1990s, the idea of Islam as a danger to social cohesion became increasingly central.³⁴ The events of 9/11, the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, and the rise of anti-Islam politicians such as Geert Wilders, have led to the media, politics and integration policies being almost entirely fixated on Muslims and Islam, and the alleged potential threat they present to democracy and social cohesion. “Salafism”, in particular, has been at the centre of these often very harsh and condemning debates that revolve around the question of the level of danger it is assumed to pose.³⁵ The implications for researchers are probably best illustrated with an excerpt from a conversation I had with a journalist in 2016 at a moment when there was a debate in Parliament about banning Salafism.

Fieldnotes

Journalist A wants to call me for information about an organisation for a newspaper story he is working on. I'm getting increasingly uncomfortable about the current debates, in particular, because of the recent calls in Dutch parliament to ban so-called Salafi organisations and stop Salafi Muslims from working as volunteers in asylum centres or as paid workers in the military services.

34 Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning and Francesco Ragazzi, “Introduction. Radicalization: Tracing the Trajectory of an ‘Empty Signifier’ in the Low Lands”, in eidem (eds), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 3–29.

35 De Koning, Becker, and Roex, *Islamic Militant Activism*.

Journalist: I want to write about the Salafi organisation X, can you help me with some info?

MdK: Is that a Salafi organisation?

Journalist: Well, I assume it is, given their pre-occupation with Syria. Or isn't it?

MdK: You want me to answer that?

Journalist: Yes, please.

MdK: Well, that is a complicated question, especially at the moment.

This fragment is part of my notes from a conversation I had with a Dutch journalist about an Islamic charity organisation that he suspected of sympathising with IS. Both the journalist's question and my hesitant reaction to it are a small part of a much wider debate about Islam, security, Salafism and the war in Syria that is taking place in the Netherlands today. In this situation imposing the label "Salafism" can have major consequences for individuals and organisations. As early as 2003, a trial took place that brought the term Salafism out into the public sphere and connected it with security. In that particular case, 12 people were accused of recruiting young men for the military jihad, specifically for the violent struggles in Kashmir, after two young men were killed there in 2002.³⁶ According to the newspapers, the Public Prosecutor stated that the 12 men belonged to "Salafism", a "radical Islamic branch with extreme ideas about Qur'an interpretation and Islamic law. Salafism pertains to establishing the Islamic state [not, of course, referring to IS at the time; MdK], the caliphate, and the rule of Islamic law, the sharia". The Prosecutor noted that Osama Bin Laden "belongs" to the followers of "Salafism".³⁷

What is important here is that, as in the Context Trial, Salafism is constructed as a clearly distinguishable Islamic ideology and movement to which people can specifically belong. This, and the statement that Osama Bin Laden is an adherent, are two points that were highly contested by other Muslims during my research. The intra-Muslim contestations about a Salafi creed or approach or "Salafism" being a clearly defined ideology are usually not taken into account in policies and public debates.

After the murder of Dutch writer and TV director Theo van Gogh in 2004, "Salafism" became the focus of Dutch counter-radicalisation policies and was seen as a threat to social cohesion, integration, the democratic order and national security. This was in part because the murderer had visited several

³⁶ All 12 men were acquitted.

³⁷ Jan Meeus, "Preek of propaganda", *De Volkskrant*, 14 May 2003. <http://www.volkskrant.nl/buitenland/preek-of-propaganda-a727271/> (accessed 10 April 2017).

mosques that were labelled Salafi by academics (including myself) and politicians and furthermore, had claimed to follow the Salafi approach himself. The label “Salafism” as used in the debates and counter-radicalisation policies has proven to be a significant factor in the problematisation of Islam in the Netherlands.³⁸

Academic researchers are not isolated from the politicisation of Islam and the racialisation of Muslims in particular, because the focus on danger and security has strongly influenced academic research on Islam.³⁹ With regard to Salafism, we can also observe a close relationship between the securitisation of Islam, academic research, and policies. First, the Dutch authorities are key players in funding research on Salafism, as was the case in the project on Muslim militant activists.⁴⁰ And second, other Dutch research (including mine), although critical of policies and debates, often does not challenge the basic assumptions behind many of the issues they address.

As shown by Nadia Fadil and myself, radicalisation paradigms circulate among and between policy circles and the academia.⁴¹ Academic research expands on them but also critiques existing policy frameworks. There have been publications that engaged with the theme of Salafism after the murder on Van Gogh asking, among other things, whether “political Salafism” could provide a barrier against “jihadism”.⁴² Ineke Roex, Sjem van Stiphout and Jean Tillie’s report is the first to focus exclusively on Dutch Salafism and was set against the background of the Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst (General Intelligence and Security Service, AIVD) and Dutch politicians questioning the so-called double agendas of “Salafist” preachers propagating an anti-integration, anti-democracy and isolationist message.⁴³ And other research

38 Fadil, de Koning, and Ragazzi, “Introduction”.

39 Thijs Sunier, “Domesticating Islam: Exploring Academic Knowledge Production on Islam and Muslims in European Societies”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (2014): 1138–1155, p. 1142.

40 We analyse this as a mode of complicity. See de Koning, Becker, and Roex, *Islamic Militant Activism*.

41 Nadia Fadil and Martijn de Koning, “Turning ‘Radicalization’ into Science: Ambivalent Translations into the Dutch (Speaking) Academic Field”, in Nadia Fadil, Martijn de Koning, and Francesco Ragazzi (eds), *Radicalization in Belgium and the Netherlands: Critical Perspectives on Violence and Security* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 53–81.

42 See in particular: Frank Buijs, Froukje Demant, and Atef Hamdi, *Strijders van eigen bodem: Radicale en democratische moslims in Nederland* [Homegrown Warriors: Radical and Democratic Muslims in the Netherlands] (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

43 Ineke Roex, Sjem van Stiphout, and Jean Tillie, *Salafisme in Nederland: Aard, omvang en dreiging* [Salafism in the Netherlands: Nature, Size and Threat] (Amsterdam: Instituut voor Migratie- en Etnische Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2010).

was commissioned after debates in Parliament over several initiatives that sought to curb or even ban Salafism, which produced a list of “known” Salafi organisations based upon academic works.⁴⁴

With regard to many works on Salafism in Europe and elsewhere, Quintan Wiktorowicz's work is particularly influential in providing the rationale behind the distillation of Salafism into various types. The function of this division is, as becomes clear in his conclusion, to gain insight into how to empower the “purists” at the expense of the “jihadis”, outlining a distinctly security-driven goal.⁴⁵ In 2003–2010 in particular, the distinctions Wiktorowicz drew were important in government reports on counter-radicalisation policies as well as academic work on radicalisation.⁴⁶

Other research, like my own, is less concerned with issues of security and radicalisation. Much of it takes a social movement perspective or a fundamentalism perspective or, in my case, focuses on how people acquire a sense of what Islam means.⁴⁷ Implicitly or explicitly, much of the academic work in this area tries to debunk the stereotypical representations of Salafism. Yet this research often fails to interrogate the dominant racialised frameworks through which Muslims are addressed and to which they respond. For example, my research shows that the ideologies and practices of those who are labelled Salafi are not homogeneous and are more often the result of doubts, struggles and compromises than is assumed in public debates and policy reports about Salafis that describe them as uncompromising, inflexible and very confident practitioners. Such study may bring nuance to the thesis heard in public debates that Salafism is at odds with—or even hostile to—democracy, but does not thematise where this question actually comes from and, for example, how it has become part of the racialisation of Muslims.⁴⁸

44 Casper van Nassau, *Salafistische moskeeorganisaties in Nederland: Markt en competitieve voordelen nader onderzocht* [Salafist Mosque Organisations in the Netherlands: Market and Competitive Advantages] (The Hague: WODC, 2017).

45 Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006): 207–239, p. 234.

46 Fadil and de Koning, “Turning ‘Radicalization’ into Science”.

47 For an overview of Dutch research on Salafism, see Maurits Berger, Merel Kahmann, Siham El Baroudi and Ahmed Hamdi, *Salafisme in Nederland belicht: Vijftien jaar salafisme onderzoek in Nederland* [Salafism in the Netherlands Highlighted: Fifteen Years of Salafism Research in the Netherlands] (Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker, 2019).

48 For a critical reflection on these, and similar, ideas, see Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando, “Rediscovering the ‘Everyday’ Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide”, *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5 (2015), 5988. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau5.2.005>.

6 Discussion

Critical self-reflection among researchers of Salafism vis à vis one's interlocutors, but also in relation to the media and state, is vital but cannot solve all the issues mentioned here. However, reflection may teach us something about the process of the racialisation of Muslims in contemporary anti-radicalisation, in anti-terrorism discourse and in legal cases. From my recollection of being in court for public hearings, the strongest impression that remains is the sense of being out of place. I felt put into a situation that was wrong. I felt burdened by responsibility because so much was at stake: the largest terrorism trial, my reputation as an academic but also, and in my view first and foremost, the lives of my interlocutors, who had become defendants in the courtroom. Notwithstanding, the Public Prosecutor's words about not taking it personally, I did take it very personally. I hesitate to qualify my own stance and emotions any more clearly than I do here. What I remember most vividly about my court appearance is struggling to make sense of the situation and failing to do so. I did not know how to define how I felt, how to describe my emotions except that I was irritated later when the Public Prosecutor questioned my authority and expertise because he considered I was too close to the defendants. Yet, notwithstanding such attacks, the fact that I could hide behind the mask of the academic during the fieldwork and in court (being not only the witness but also the Expert Witness) also signified my privilege as a white male academic—a privilege that might well be stronger than that of my female Muslim colleagues.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, I was angry about various people in court using my work to their own advantage and this anger spurred me forward and prompted me to embark on this process of analysis: I want to understand what had actually happened in court and how academic knowledge about Salafism was used.

Both the Public Prosecutor and the court were very adamant in pointing out that this case was not a legal case against Islam or any Islamic ideology, but their focus was clearly on how the defendants translated their ideological belief system into action and whether and how that may have posed a risk to other young people. They therefore reproduced a division between the “acceptable Muslim”, who may be at risk of radicalisation, and the “unacceptable Muslim”, who poses a risk (in this case the defendants). This is not a clear cut differentiation, which, I suggest, explains why the Public Prosecutor went to such great lengths to construct the defendants as “Salafis” and/or “Jihadis” based on a variety of sources, aiming to convince the court that it is the ideology that

49 See: Moors, “Trouble with Transparency”.

connected the defendants and drove them. The prospect of future political violence, the militants' own actions and their rhetoric became condensed – by a descriptive connection of the defendants' relation to ideology, IS, violence and terrorism – into a representation of Salafism and Jihadism that was imposed upon the defendants. In the end, making the reference to *taqiyya* constituted a mode of rhetorical closure on the part of the Public Prosecutor, who blended the work of academics, security services and Islamophobic commentators into what amounted to a circular definition of Salafism. The label Salafism and the *taqiyya* argument were used to ascribe signifiers of terrorism, barbarity and danger to the defendants. Academic knowledge about Salafism and Islam in general easily feeds into that with its already existing focus on danger, integration and radicalisation. While there are definitely critical approaches to such perspectives, it is difficult if not impossible for academic research on Salafism not to be affected by and contribute to the racialisation of Muslims.

This contribution began by referencing the remark Khalid made to me after he handed back to me the transcript of my interview with him: "For them it is just a story, but for me it's my life." He was referring to journalists, but his remark also highlights an important aspect of what we academics do: we objectify our interlocutors' lives in our analysis and publications. The alienation to which this quote speaks is reason enough to warrant us all developing a reflexive attitude within the context of this on-going politicisation and racialisation of our fields of study.

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