Bilal Benyaich with the collaboration of Zibar Omar


This is an important, well-researched, and instructive book on Islam and radicalism among Moroccans in Brussels. From the perspective of international Islamic studies, the monograph’s major weakness is that it has been written in Dutch, a language playing a rather insignificant role in contemporary academia. However, from the viewpoint of the country of Belgium in general and its capital Brussels in particular, the fact that Bilal Benyaich, himself of Moroccan origin and political scientist at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), has authored his book in Dutch is to be considered the cherry on the cake which he offers his (Belgian/Flemish) readers in form of his learned and insightful study. Since Dutch is an official language in both Belgium and Brussels, Benyaich’s astonishment over the total lack of Dutch-speaking research on the “Moroccan and Islamic dimensions of Brussels” (7) is reasonable. Benyaich’s careful study goes beyond previous research not only in terms of language, but also in terms of content. Two years before Benyaich, Felice Dassetto has presented, in French, a monograph with a quite similar subject matter: L’Iris et le Croissant: Bruxelles et l’Islam au défi de la co-inclusion (2011). Benyaich is aware of and repeatedly refers to Dassetto’s study. But while Dassetto studies Islam in Brussels in general (cf. my respective book review in Isl. 88/2 [2012] 456–60), Benyaich, with the help of Islamic Studies scholar Zibar Omar, particularly researches Islam and radicalism among Moroccans living in Brussels. In what follows, the findings of Benyaich’s pertinent book will be summarized and annotated and, thus, be made partly accessible to a non-Dutch reading scholarly audience.

The first chapter (9–34) provides “facts and figures” (9) concerning Brussels and its inhabitants of Moroccan origin. According to scientific surveys, Brussels has about 1,200,000 inhabitants, people not officially registered in the city (e.g., students, diplomats, homeless persons) included (10). Between 125,000 and 150,000 persons are of Moroccan origin (14, cf. 38). In view of this significant number, Moroccans call Brussels “the capital of Moroccans in Europe” (14). The vast majority of Moroccans live in disadvantaged neighborhoods of Brussels and are confronted with poverty, a lack of prospects, (youth) unemployment, and a low level of education (16–34).

The second chapter (35–54) zooms in on the 75,000 to 100,000 Muslims among the Moroccan Brusselians, i.e., those who deliberately practice Islam (38). Of the 70 to 80 mosques located in Brussels (39), about one half can be labeled ‘Moroccan’ since they are governed and/or mainly frequented by Moroccans
(41). These mosques, in turn, are either of Arabic or of Berber character. The Moroccan neighborhoods which are at times labeled “Little Morocco” (43) are characterized by an increasing “Islamization” (43) in form of an evident presence of mosques, men with long beards, veiled women and girls, traditional Islamic vesture, Islamic book stores, expressly “Islamic” Halal butcher shops, and Alcohol-free salons de thé in these districts (44–45). Benyaich speaks of an “Islamic zone” (40) and states, “The omnipresence of the Islam presses in the direction of conformism” (48).

The third chapter (55–68) investigates the influence of Saudi-Arabic Wahhabism on (Moroccan) Muslims of Brussels. Benyaich focuses on the “Islamic and Cultural Center” (ICC) that has its seat in the “Great Mosque of Brussels.” Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in the governance of the ICC. Until very recently, the ICC had a decisive say in the appointment of the about 600 Islam teachers at Belgian public primary and secondary schools (60–61, 68).

In the fourth chapter (69–96), Benyaich presents the results of an indicative survey he has conducted among 197 Moroccans (men and women, old and young, literate and illiterate) in the beginning of 2010. Space does not permit to reproduce all of the results. Two examples must suffice. First, the question “Do you go to the mosque?” (83) was answered as follows: “Never” (27%), “seldom” (26%), “sometimes” (20%), “often” (17%), and “very often” (10%). Second, the statement “The legal introduction of the Islamic law (sharia) for Muslims in Belgium is necessary” (89) caused the following reactions: “I totally disagree” (23%), “I disagree” (17%), “no opinion” (23%), “I agree” (17%), and “I totally agree” (19%).

The fifth chapter (97–138) studies Salafism in Brussels which is sub-divided into “traditional,” (non-terroristic) “militant,” and (terroristic) “jihadist” Salafism (103). While stressing that it is difficult to provide exact numbers, Benyaich carefully speaks of thousands of traditional and hundreds of militant Salafists (104). With regard to jihadist Salafists, Benyaich refers to the about hundred Belgians fighting in Syria as of April 2013 (109). Benyaich then offers worthwhile insights into both the history and the various concrete manifestations of Brusselian Salafism (112–38). He studies the major Salafist organizations (e.g., the “Centre Al-Forqane”) and preachers/speakers (e.g., Mustafa Kastit, Daoud van Beveren, Rachid Haddach, and Illias Azaouaj who in the meantime apparently has been killed: “Un prédicateur belge décapité en Syrie”, www.rtbf.be, 8 September 2014) and provides a vast amount of respective internet addresses. According to Benyaich’s research, a little less than half of Brussel’s Moroccan mosques have Salafist tendencies (123).

The sixth chapter (139–73) focuses on the influence that the Muslim Brotherhood has in and on Brussels. Again, Benyaich refers to the most important