Navigating Securitization and Individual Faith: Imam Khalid Benhaddou's Approach to Islam in Secular Belgium

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Abstract: *In a Europe increasingly characterized by the securitization of Islam within a secular landscape, this study delves into the dynamic interplay between religious individualization and securitization through Imam Khalid Benhaddou's experiences in Belgium. It aims to critically examine his discourses and practices against the backdrop of Islamic governmentality in Europe. The paper highlights Benhaddou as a figure navigating these complex terrains, suggesting that his progressive stance, while challenging his credibility among some European Muslims, critically engages with the narrative of religion's securitization. By scrutinizing this form of governmentality, the study reveals how it might contribute to defensive postures among Muslims, potentially fostering radicalization. Thus, Benhaddou's ambivalent position towards Islam's securitization emerges as a revolutionary approach, offering new insights into the negotiation of religious identity in the European context.*

Keywords: *imams in Europe, governmentality, securitization of religion, religious adaptation, Moroccan Islam, Islamic individualization, European secularism.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

The Muslim community in Belgium was initially made up primarily of migrant laborers recruited from the Mediterranean regions in the 1960s to work in the Belgian steel and mining sectors. In comparison to France or the United Kingdom, Belgium had no colonial engagement with Muslims. Since the 1960s, Muslim migrant workers have settled in Belgium under bilateral agreements, particularly with the governments of Turkey and Morocco. This planned and coordinated migration came to an end in 1974, when the 1970s economic crisis reduced the need for foreign labor force. However, a second, less organized wave of immigration from North Africa and Turkey followed, when family reunion and tourist visas made it possible for more Muslim immigrants to enter.

As a result of family reunion, Muslims became more visible. Initially, they were referred to as "foreign laborers," then "migrants," with no religious implications; it was only later that they were referred to as "Muslim" [1]. Interestingly, the shift in rhetoric toward stigmatization coincided with the procedures of institutionalizing and officially recognizing Islam as a religion in Belgium.

Many of the studies that focus on imam training tend to reiterate well-known realities. Imams in Western Europe predominantly reflect historical migration patterns, which began with the influx of often uneducated guest workers from the Islamic world. As the focus shifted from worker recruitment to family reunification, the institutionalization of Islam became an inherent aspect of European reality. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the older generation of imams, unprepared for the European context and unfamiliar with local languages, fell short of the evolving expectations. As subsequent generations of Muslims grew up speaking only European languages, the practice of importing imams became less viable.

In the aftermath of 9/11, public discourse increasingly emphasized imams and religious educators as proponents of Muslim isolation and resistance to integration. The proposal was put forth that imams, trained within the confines of Europe, would bolster Muslim integration, mitigate violence, reconcile disparities between societal norms and Muslim practices, and encourage Islamic enlightenment. This causes extensive responsibility bestowed upon imams. Such responsibility does not align with their roles as mere employees functioning within a bureaucratic framework. Western Europe posits significant demands on its imams [2]. In European societies, imams suffer heightened workloads attributed to a surge in novel responsibilities. They also have pervasive mistrust and suspicion toward state intervention [3].

The divergent perspectives of local Muslim communities and European governments on the training of imams underscore the complexities surrounding religious leadership within European contexts. While there exists a mutual aspiration for imams to be proficient in local languages and to serve as cultural intermediaries between secular European societies and Muslim communities, the underlying motivations and expectations diverge significantly. Governments perceive imams as pivotal to the processes of integration and the promotion

of interpretations of Islam that are in harmony with national values. Conversely, European Muslims seek leaders who can adeptly navigate their traditional roles within a predominantly non-Islamic societal framework, as noted by [4].

Furthermore, the authority of imams is increasingly contested, influenced by the pervasive reach of the Internet and the governance structures of mosques, which often place imams under the jurisdiction of mosque committees [5]. This scenario presents challenges to the autonomy and influence of imams, further complicating their roles within the community.

Additionally, the conditions facing imams in Europe —marked by material and psychological vulnerabilities, as well as their notable scarcity— result in a pronounced dependence on their countries of origin. This dependence can engender a homogenized religious interpretation that may not accurately reflect the diverse experiences and needs of Muslim communities in Europe. Such a scenario often leaves European Muslims yearning for religious narratives and guidance that resonate more profoundly with their specific circumstances in the European milieu [6].

The landscape of Islamic religious authority in Europe has become increasingly complex and fluid, with imams now representing just one of many actors within a competitive religious sphere. This diversification has led to a diminished influence of nations of origin over Islamic religious practices and interpretations [7]. Concurrently, the role of the imam is undergoing a transformation, with trends indicating a movement towards a form of nationalized religious authority [8].

In response to the transnational dynamics of Islam and its framing as a security concern within Europe, governments have implemented a range of strategies to address what is often perceived as the 'Muslim presence issue' [9]. These efforts include a more proactive stance by European authorities in influencing the development of Muslim leadership, with a particular focus on fostering imams who embody the host countries' objectives. This intervention extends to the redefinition of imams' roles and their preaching practices within places of worship. Imams identified as posing a 'threat to national security' are subject to expulsion and revocation of their residence permits [9].

The strategy of appointing "consular imams," alongside meticulous scrutiny of their training and beliefs for the purpose of residence permit issuance, is aimed at ensuring that only "good imams" are allowed entry. However, this approach may be inadvertently counterproductive, as excessive governmental oversight could undermine the credibility and authority of imams within Muslim communities [10]. Within the unique European context, which is characterized by a significant demand for both theological guidance and secular integration, there emerges an opportunity for imams to ascend as public intellectuals, bridging the gap between religious and societal expectations [11].

Against this backdrop, this study critically examines the discourses of Imam Benhaddou within the broader framework of Islamic governmentality in Europe, exploring the historical perception of Islam as a security threat. Incorporating insights from Michel Pecheux's "discourses in conflict," the analysis leverages Sara Mills' exploration of discourse to operationalize Pecheux's theoretical constructs [12]. This approach enables a nuanced examination of the text, recognizing and exploring the discursive tensions inherent within. Benhaddou's discourses are understood not as a unified whole but as a collection of competing narratives that reflect the complex milieu in which they exist.

II.   ISLAM IN BELGIAN

The late 1960s and 1970s marked a significant milestone in the development of Islam in Belgium, across Europe, and worldwide. This period aligned with a surge in the influence and spread of politicized and transnational Islamic movements, not only within the Arab world but also beyond. The rising influence of Islamic movements among Belgian Moroccans impacted both Belgium and Morocco. In Belgium, the increased visibility of Islam sparked widespread debates from the late 1970s. Particularly in the Francophone region, influenced by France, the appearance of veils in Brussels was viewed as a sign of "Muslim fundamentalism" [13]. The increasing influence and appeal of Islamic movements across the globe, including among migrants from the Maghreb region living in Europe, has sparked considerable interest and worry among European researchers and analysts. This concern has raised discussions about the potential development of a distinct form of Islam that is unique to Europe [14].

The first "affaire du foulard" in Brussels followed Paris's incident in 1989, heightening public concern over Islam [15]. This led to Belgium's effort to establish a Muslim representative body to ease tensions and limit foreign influence, culminating in the creation of the Executive for Muslims in Belgium in 1998 [16].

The recognition of Islam in 1974 initially aimed to provide a formal legal framework for religious education in public schools. This move also came amidst strained diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia following the 1974 oil crisis, and a goal to formally recognize and integrate cooperation with foreign authorities like Morocco and Turkey [17].

The concept of a representative body for Muslims in Belgium surfaced in the early seventies, but it wasn't until 1998 that the Executive for Muslims in Belgium (EMB) was established after general elections among the Muslim community in the fall of 1998. This marked the end of a prolonged period filled with unsuccessful attempts at establishing representation, involving religious, secular, and international actors. Studies have pointed out the challenges faced, such as confessional and ethnic divisions impeding strong leadership [18], and the misfit between Belgian law's hierarchical structure, based on the Catholic Church, and the diverse Muslim community [19].

The establishment of a representative body was not free from state intervention. Examples include the federal state's efforts to establish a representative body in 1985, the non-recognition of elections by the Saudi-lead Islamic Cultural Center in 1991, and the security-based disqualification of some elected candidates in 1998 [20].

Since the 1980s, migration to the EU has progressively been framed as a matter of security, leading to the exclusion of specific groups deemed threats to a perceived uniform European cultural identity [21]. Amidst rising concerns over immigration, security, social cohesion, and the rise of fundamentalism, Islam has increasingly been portrayed as a threat to the European identity. This shift reflects broader debates about national identity, values, and the challenges of integrating diverse communities. The celebration of diversity and multiculturalism is gradually being supplanted by more assimilative policies and rhetoric, which emphasize the national language, culture, and citizenship.

The move towards more assimilation-focused national policies appears to have been triggered by the moral panic following Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, alongside Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" theory [22], which gained justification after 9/11, 2001, and the subsequent series of attacks in Madrid on March 11, 2004, and in London on July 7, 2005, as well as the incidents in France involving Charlie Hebdo on January 7, 2015.

The phenomenon of immigrant xenophobia and Islamophobia are multifaceted issues that have deep roots in historical, socio-political, and economic contexts. European media and political discourse consistently frame Muslims as a monolithic threat and Islam as fundamentally incompatible with European values of secularism, democracy, and human rights. Muslims are seen as not practicing their religion in their host countries but Islamizing Europe. "We are under siege, the Muslims are silently colonizing us and we are losing our very roots and culture." This fear is not merely a cultural or religious prejudice but is intricately linked to broader anxieties about national identity and became associated with particular symbols. "In France," Tariq Ramadan argues, "it is the headscarf or burka; in Germany, mosques; in Britain, violence; cartoons in Denmark; homosexuality in the Netherlands—and so on" [23].

Anxieties over the spreading of Islam in Europe and the threat it is perceived to pose for European values and national identity in an era of globalization and immigrations flows are projected onto Islamic symbols. "At the very moment," Tariq Ramadan observes, "Europeans find themselves asking, in a globalizing, migratory world, 'What are our roots?' 'Who are we?' 'What will our future look like?' They see around them new citizens, new skin colors, new symbols to which they are unaccustomed" [23].

The perception of Muslims in Europe as a challenging presence has led to their depiction as outsiders within national borders, linked to the expectations of their integration and assimilation. These efforts, according to Farris, aim to manage and reshape Muslim lives [24]. Foucault describes governmentality as a complex system of power that shapes individual and societal behaviors, promoting self-discipline and governing norms [25]. Within this context, Muslims are often seen as inherently different and unable to integrate, paradoxically solidifying their "foreign" identity, as discussed by Bracke & Hernández Aguilar [26]. The concept of Islam as a Trojan Horse illustrates how this form of governance seeks to alter Muslim identities and practices in Europe, highlighting the real aims and impacts of integration policies.

This review concentrates on the establishment and development of Islam in Europe, with a special emphasis on Belgium, elucidating how this process unfolded within a context deeply interwoven with securitization concerns. The concept of European Islam is often misconstrued as synonymous with a form of Islam that is inherently open-ended; however, this interpretation is misleading. As Mandaville points out, the diversification of religious interpretations within Islam does not inherently foster tolerance or open-mindedness [27]. European Islam, in essence, refers to the manifestation of Islam that arises from intricate interactions within complex transnational dynamics. For instance, rather than conceptualizing a "Belgian Islam" for Moroccans in Belgium, it is more accurate to perceive the religious experiences of Belgian Moroccans as being shaped by ongoing theological and geopolitical shifts involving the Moroccan state, European (specifically Belgian) state policies, and various transnational actors across the Muslim world [28]. The religious practice and interpretation of Khalid Benhaddou, the youthful and clean-shaven Imam of El Fath Mosque in Ghent, Belgium—the largest mosque in the city—serves as a pertinent example of this phenomenon.

III.   KHALID BENHADDOU'S CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

Khalid Benhaddou was born in 1988 in Ghent and raised by parents who immigrated from Al Houseima in the 60s and settled in Belgium. Encouraged by his parents, Khalid memorized the Koran at twelve in Europe [29]. Commenting on his and his parents' worlds, he says, "I grew up in a rather traditional Muslim family. My parents have their own history and culture from which they descend. It has many virtues, but I have a different background. I was born here, in Ghent, grew up in the Brugse Poort, in a different world than the one in which my parents grew up" [30]. Having memorized the Quran:

I had a good voice, they said, "You are ready to lead the Friday prayer." I had experience in public speaking. After memorizing the Quran, I participated in international Quran competitions for years, with candidates from all over the world [31].

In the distinguished Dubai Quran recitation competition, a notable achievement marked his journey; he secured third place, representing Belgium with pride. This accomplishment sets him apart, especially considering that, unlike his peers who often sought religious education in North Africa or the Middle East, Benhaddou embarked on his Islamic theological studies within Belgium's borders. Beginning at the tender age of 14, he dedicated his weekends to learning at the Grand Mosque in Brussels. By 2006, at just eighteen, Benhaddou's commitment and talent led him to become the youngest imam in Belgium, serving at El Fath Mosque in Ghent. His path reflects a distinctly local trajectory of religious education, aligning closely with the discourse in Belgian politics and academic scholarship advocating for the cultivation of locally trained imams e.g., [32].

As a child and later as an Imam, Benhaddou claims he became aware of the gap between the traditional world of his parents and Belgium realities. He says about his youth, "I felt that there were frictions between the value system I was given and the value system of society" [33].

Later, he became chairman of the platform for Flemish imams and coordinator of the educational network of Islam experts, collaborates with the Ministry of Education on the prevention of polarization and radicalization, and gives training and lectures on Islam. Benhaddou is chairman of the Platform of Flemish imams. He addresses both Turkish (12,000 people) and Moroccan Muslims (7,000) in Ghent.

Khalid Benhaddou articulates a strong sense of identity as a Flemish citizen, emphatically identifying himself within this context. "I consider myself a Flemish imam," he asserts. "I was born here, and I am Flemish. Despite my Moroccan roots, my primary identity is a Flemish citizen" [34]. On social media platforms such as Facebook, he presents himself as Belgian, Flemish, Moroccan, and Muslim, embracing a multifaceted identity. Benhaddou voices a critique against the prevalent practice of relying on foreign theologians for Islamic guidance in Belgium, advocating for a more localized form of Islamic leadership. "We need more Flemish imams!" he declares, expressing approval of the initiation of imam training programs in Leuven and Antwerp by Belgian institutions. "This is a positive development," he comments, optimistic about the future. "In the coming years, we will see an increase in imams who are homegrown. This will undoubtedly be advantageous for the development of a European Islam" [34]. Furthermore, Benhaddou emphasizes the importance of representing himself as a Fleming, aiming to demonstrate that imams can emerge from local contexts, challenging the notion that they must invariably originate from the Middle East [34].

He hopes that the phenomenon of imported imams will eventually come to an end. He views it as a matter of language and context. The first generation of immigrants did not speak the language of the host country, it was normal for them to have an imam who spoke their language and shared their culture. This, Benhaddou insists, should not apply to the new generations in Europe:

Today we have many imported imams who preach a discourse that is good for areas in Morocco, good for a region where they grew up themselves. Muslims here largely cling to a reading of Islam that comes from the Middle East. That is not good. We need contextual Islam in Europe. We must disconnect from the experience of Islam there. But that is only possible if we have valid figures here [34].

Benhaddou actively seeks to distance himself from foreign influences in the religious affairs of Flemish and Belgian Muslims, emphasizing the advantages of local imam leadership. He argues that, in contrast to imams who are brought in from abroad, those who are born and raised locally, like himself, possess an intrinsic understanding of the identity challenges faced by the second generation and subsequent generations of Muslims in Western Europe. This deep-rooted comprehension enables them to effectively address and navigate the complex issues that arise in the daily lives of these communities [34].

However, while advocating for a contextual approach to Islam for Belgian Muslims, Benhaddou does not acknowledge that the concept of a purely contextual Islam is somewhat elusive. Belgian Islam cannot entirely

escape its transnational influences; the global flow of religious knowledge continues to permeate various channels, highlighting the unavoidable presence of transnational elements within local Islamic practices and the challenges posed by decentralized interpretations.

Benhaddou emphasizes the crucial role language plays in reaching and educating young Flemish Muslims, advocating for the use of Dutch in religious teachings and sermons. He links the absence of youths from Ghent, a city with a significant Muslim population, joining IS to fight, to the effective communication and understanding facilitated by preaching in their native language. By ensuring that sermons are accessible in Dutch, Benhaddou believes it prevents young Muslims from seeking answers from potentially radical and unreliable sources online. This approach not only nurtures a more inclusive religious community but also counters the narrative of alienation and radicalization [34].

Benhaddou confronts and critiques the prevailing securitization narrative that simplifies the identities of Muslim immigrants to solely their religious affiliation, overlooking the complexity and plurality of their identities—a discourse that has gained traction in Belgium since the 1970s [1]. By championing the acknowledgment of multi-dimensional identities, Benhaddou endeavors to shift the focus from an overly Islam-centric view to one that appreciates the diverse aspects of individual identity [35].

In his discourse, Benhaddou also addresses the perceived conflict between Flemish and Muslim identities, asserting their compatibility and shared values. This stance directly opposes narratives that frame Muslims as inherently at odds with European society, promoting instead a vision of harmonious coexistence and shared societal challenges [34]. By doing so, Benhaddou not only refutes the notion of irreconcilable differences between Muslim and European identities but also champions the potential for Muslims to integrate fully into European societies without forsaking their religious and cultural heritage. His perspective offers a counter-narrative to anti-Islamic immigration rhetoric, advocating for an inclusive understanding of European identity that embraces its Muslim members [26].

IV.   BENHADDOU'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELIGION

Benhaddou stands out as a religious intellectual eager to harmonize Islamic doctrines with Western ideals. He claims to be an advocate of "rational Islam," and a contemporary voice in the Flemish Muslim world. He is also a staunch critic of *Salafist* theology and preaches against radicalism. "To stop radicalization," he insists, "you have to know the story behind it" [37]. Benhaddou is the author of several books in Dutch where he tries to reconcile Western values of enlightenment with the teachings of Islam. His publications include *Is there More than One Islam?* (2016), and co-authored, *May God Have a Liberal, a Christian and a Muslim in Conversation* (2017), *Opinion, Fact and Judgment: Lessons for the 21st Century* (2018), and *Lost in Enlightenment: What Can We Agree on in a Society of Us against Them* (2019)?

Aiming to dispel misconceptions about Sharia, Benhaddou clarifies that its primary purpose is deterrence rather than punishment. "Sharia is a holistic legal system, encompassing more than the oft-cited punishments like death by stoning. These rules need to be contextualized historically, emphasizing their deterrent intent rather than a literal application. During the prophet's era, such punitive measures were rarely executed," he notes [37].

Furthermore, Benhaddou asserts that, in essence, Sharia embodies values akin to European law, emphasizing that its interpretation is pivotal. "When approached in spirit, Sharia mirrors European laws. However, problems arise when one attempts a verbatim application of ancient rules in today's context. The prophet was not fixated on regulations, but on justice," he remarks [38]. In his efforts to normalize the concept of Sharia within a European context, Benhaddou directly confronts the prevailing narrative that seeks to alienate Islam by portraying the integration of Sharia principles as a general threat to European societal norms. This narrative is frequently employed within securitization discourses, where the potential for "Islamization" is cited as a security concern.

In articulating his perspective on Sharia, Benhaddou positions himself distinctly against the tide of "halalization of society," which he interprets as an overabundance of flexibility rather than a stringent adherence to norms. He articulates, "I refuse to be part of this 'halalization' wave, characterized by an excess of flexibility. I understand its appeal, especially to a rising Muslim generation seeking guidance in a liberal society" [39]. Benhaddou observes that imams who focus on declaring actions as 'haram'—forbidden—tend to gain popularity, a trend that poses challenges to his more nuanced stance, particularly when it comes to contentious issues like music.

Further distancing himself from the conservative ends of the spectrum, Benhaddou explicitly rejects Salafism and conservative interpretations of Islam, which he views as incompatible with European societal norms. His reaction to the exposure of Salafist mosque schools in the Netherlands by Nieuwsuur and NRC was one of dismay. He noted, "The Salafist worldview harbors ideas that conflict with our societal model, but what is particularly striking is the fervor with which these ideas are imparted to children" [40]. This critique, while highlighting concerns about Salafist practices, also touches on the broader issue of oversimplifying Salafism,

which is a diverse movement with a range of interpretations.

Benhaddou considers Flanders to be less susceptible to indoctrination with Salafism in Koranic schools and radical ideologies that breed jihadism. He knows that Flanders is different from the Netherlands but is aware that it also exists in the north of Belgium as well. He announces, "Here and there I receive signals that there are Koranic schools with a Salafist signature, that they have a strange world view. That is not in line with our model of society" [40]. Benhaddou notices this from parents who come to him because their children make certain strange statements, but also from teachers at school, "That happens now and then, without overestimating it. We have to think about how we can do something about it" [40].

He is convinced that, "Salafism in the Netherlands is much more structured, much more institutionalized in the Muslim community than it is with us. In the Netherlands they have a much more foothold, a much greater reach and therefore a greater influence." But he is apprehensive of how social media could serve as a vehicle to spread the Salafist ideology to Flanders, "They can also reach young people in Flanders, for example through social media. We have to keep an eye on that" [40].

Benhaddou underscores the significance of mosque recognition by the Belgian government as a strategy to oversee Koranic schools effectively. He articulates that Quranic schools, often associated with mosques, evade governmental and Islamic executive oversight when these mosques lack official recognition. "Quran schools are frequently affiliated with mosques. Absent government recognition, there are limited means to address any issues. This situation allows for Islamic education to proceed unchecked by either government authorities or Muslim executive bodies," he explains [40]. By advocating for state intervention in the structuring of religious education and proposing a ban on Salafism, Benhaddou aligns with governmental strategies focused not merely on addressing tangible threats but also on perpetuating a narrative that isolates Muslims by intensifying the securitization of Islam, distinguishing it from other faiths within Belgium. This stance implicates Benhaddou in contributing to a form of governmentality that, under the guise of security, risks further marginalizing Muslims by portraying them as fundamentally other.

He claims that the aim of his book, *Is dit nu de islam?* 2017 (*Is this Islam now?*), is to "build a bridge between the Quran, which has become an integral part of me since childhood, and the European/global society in which I live" [41]. In the book, he calls himself a searching Muslim. Being trained in the Grand Mosque, he felt that Salafism did not suit him and delved further into Islamic and Western philosophers. Benhaddou is uncomfortable with problematic terms like "European Islam," "Enlightened Islam," or "Moderate Islam." He prefers to use instead the concept of "rational Islam," which for him means that Muslims must deal with their context and their reality in a more rational way and think critically [33].

Benhaddou's critique of the term "European Islam" arises from his belief that it inadvertently establishes a dualistic perspective, positioning Europe inwards while potentially casting the external world as a threat. He contends that "European Islam" fails to capture the universal essence of the faith, suggesting that it may not sufficiently encompass the global and diverse character of Islam. Furthermore, Benhaddou finds the term "enlightened Islam" problematic because it draws on the Enlightenment, a distinct European historical epoch, insinuating that Islam must undergo a similar process of transformation—an expectation he deems unreasonable. Similarly, he critiques the term "moderate Islam" as if Islam is inherently radical [33]. By eschewing such terminologies, particularly in the context of Belgian Islam, Benhaddou counteracts the securitization of Islam in Europe, which otherwise risks reinforcing its portrayal as the perpetual other.

For Benhaddou, "Rational Islam" emerges as the preferred nomenclature. He places critical thinking at the core of Rational Islam, questioning the rationality of mainstream Islamic practices that, in his view, often rely on precepts incompatible with reason and scientific inquiry. Invoking the legacy of the medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd, Benhaddou aspires to reconcile the rational-scientific paradigm with the Koranic teachings. He opposes the notion of defining and evaluating ourselves and others based on (superior) values, advocating instead for judgments based on actions. This approach, he believes, is essential for challenging theories that ascribe conflicts among civilizations, cultures, and peoples to intrinsic differences. Emphasizing the need to redefine our interactions through our actions, Benhaddou refers to a Koranic verse to underscore his argument: "The good deed and the bad deed are not equal. Push back (evil) by what is better; and then, the one whom between you and him there was enmity (will become) as though he was a devoted friend" [33].

He emphasizes the importance of contextually interpreting the Quran, cautioning against puritanical or reactionary readings that seek concrete answers rather than reflections on personal life and growth. According to Benhaddou, recognizing the human element in interpreting the divine word of the Quran is essential for a meaningful engagement with the text and its teachings [41; 30].

Benhaddou's engagement with a diverse array of Western philosophers and thinkers such as Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, along with political figures and contemporary authors like Bart De Wever, Yuval Noah Harari, Francis Fukuyama, Karel Dillen, Wim Van Rooy, and Irvin Yalom, coupled with his study of Muslim scholars like Averroes (Ibn Rushd) and Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri, has profoundly shaped his understanding and approach to Islam and its place in the Western world. Drawing from this rich intellectual heritage,

Benhaddou observes a fundamental congruence between Islamic and Western values, particularly in the emphasis on the rule of law, human rights, and basic principles as the foundation of social consensus and the fabric of all religions [37; 41].

Benhaddou places significant emphasis on transcending the traditional dichotomy of Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam) and Dar al-Harb (the House of War), advocating instead for the concept of Europe as a new ummah, or community. He outlines three potential interpretations of ummah in Europe: a narrow view where the community comprises only Muslims disconnected from European culture; a Muslim community that exists as an ummah within the broader European community; and Muslims in Europe viewing the diverse, multicultural society they are part of as their new ummah. Benhaddou champions the third perspective, encouraging Muslims to embrace the multicultural fabric of Europe as their community [30].

Furthermore, Benhaddou articulates a vision where religion, despite the advancements of contemporary society, continues to serve as an ethical guide. He reflects on the historical role of religion in unifying societies, offering purpose, healing, and fostering connections among people. While acknowledging the benefits of secularism, he also notes its limitations, particularly in terms of the existential voids and isolation it can produce. In this context, religion emerges as a potential bridge, providing solace and direction [34].

Yet, Benhaddou is acutely aware that religion alone cannot address all of today's societal challenges in Flanders. He highlights pressing existential issues such as climate change, biotechnology, and artificial intelligence, questioning the role of religion in these areas. He warns that without evolution and adaptability, religion risks becoming irrelevant if it remains anchored solely in ancient scriptures without engaging with contemporary realities [39].

V.   VIEWS ON GENDER

In 2017, the Muslim Executive of Belgium, led by Salah Echallaoui, proposed the introduction of female preachers. Echallaoui, a proponent for modernizing Islam, previously shared in a newspaper his belief in amplifying women's roles. "A woman as an imam? Not yet. But the day will come. In certain locales, women already teach and preach. I'm keen on having women in our theological council, and envision female imams in our future" [42].

Khalid Benhaddou notes that while female preachers, or *murshidates*, are more common internationally, like in Morocco where many women have been officially recognized within Islam, they remain a novelty in Europe. He says, "Many female preachers exist in the Islamic world, but Europe is less familiar with the idea. Several Flemish and Dutch mosques are witnessing increased participation by women in roles like teaching or youth work" [42].

 Benhadddou sees this evolution as a necessary step. He states, "Granting them an official status is not just normal, but a necessary evolution. However, this is distinct from the conversation about female imams" [42].

When posed with a question about freedom, particularly in the context of gender identity and roles, Benhaddou first acknowledged the importance of individual choices, but he also cautioned that unchecked freedom, devoid of morality, might exacerbate inequalities, "Nietzsche had forewarned that a post-Christian moral world would not necessarily be egalitarian, suggesting a landscape where the powerful overshadow the weak. His predictions ring true today, given the prevalent social disparities" [43].

Benhaddou perceives controversies like the one surrounding headscarves as manifestations of the inequalities produced by unchecked freedom. "It is disheartening to see religion being manipulated for cultural politics. Issues like the burkini and hijab are incessantly politicized" [43].

The Flemish imam views the intense debate surrounding the headscarf as not only outdated but also disproportionate in its significance. He remarks, "It is disconcerting to see our society magnifying this as a central issue. The United Kingdom, for instance, does not engage in such debates. The Netherlands too seems to be adopting a similar stance" [34]. In his perspective, this debate merely serves as a distraction from the genuine challenges facing Flemish Muslims.

Arguing against the inconsistency in the Flemish context, he points out, "It is a glaring contradiction to champion the virtues of a multicultural and diverse society, and then restrict the wearing of the headscarf in the name of neutrality. The government, of all entities, should be reinforcing the idea that diversity is a strength. True diversity entails allowing individuals the freedom to express their religious beliefs without constraint" [43].

Countering misconceptions about the headscarf, Benhaddou emphasizes the principle of individual choice in Islam, stating, "Notice how many Muslim women choose not to wear the hijab while their peers do. The essence of a Muslim woman is defined by her thoughts and beliefs, not the attire she dons" [43].

When a journalist posed a question regarding the views of figures like Egyptian-American writer Mona Eltahawy or Turkish-German imam Seyran Ates, who argue that Muslim women in the West who advocate for the hijab may not fully comprehend the struggles of their counterparts in the Arab world who fight against it, he responded by suggesting a shift in focus. "While it is true that the hijab often brings up negative connotations

for many, such as oppression or aversion to LGBTQ+, maybe it is these underlying associations we need to address rather than the hijab itself" [43].

His views on homosexuality are multifaceted. He mentions, "While Islam promotes a distinct kind of relationship, it underscores that no one has the authority to judge another, be it on religious grounds or sexual orientation. What one chooses to do privately is between them and God; I do not offer opinions on such matters" [44].

However, when reminded of the Enlightenment's role in ensuring individuals in Belgium could freely express their sexual orientation, he retorts:

> The Enlightenment also championed the right to diverse thought. If you compel me to accept homosexuality, isn't that in conflict with Enlightenment ideals? I can hold a different perspective on homosexuality than you. It is concerning how frequently believers are pushed into defensive positions on subjects like homosexuality or evolution. It aligns with an emerging tendency to sideline religion in our society [44].

Benhaddou distances himself from approaches that advocate for the prohibition of the headscarf or niqab or that place Muslims in a defensive posture by probing their views on homosexuality. In doing so, he diverges from certain securitization strategies and forms of governmentality that tend to alienate Muslims by pushing them towards defensiveness emphasizing that Enlightenment champions freedom of thought. His critique is not aimed at establishing an opposition to homosexuality; rather, it seeks to address and mitigate the alienation experienced by Muslims due to their beliefs. Similar perspectives exist within Orthodox Christianity, which does not face the same degree of scrutiny or imposition from security or governmental measures [45].

VI.   VIEWS ON POLITICS AND RADICALIZATION

Benhaddou thinks that Muslims should actively participate in European politics. He argues, "Our community often feels out of place in the existing political landscape. We do not entirely identify with liberals, socialists, or nationalists. Yet, rooted in our Islamic values, we possess a collective vision for society. There is no conflict in this, provided these values align with democratic principles" [34].

He posits that the divine should have a place in politics. "Throughout history, religion has shaped societal norms. In our era of unparalleled personal freedom, many grapple with unhappiness, evident in rising antidepressant use and suicide rates. We do not live in a joyous society," Benhaddou notes [34]. He further emphasizes, "Religion should significantly influence societal structures. It is a primary source of our shared norms. While my alignment with Christian Democrats is limited, we resonate with certain values rooted in faith. To me, the foundation of morality is divinely ordained, not individually determined" [34].

Addressing the representation of Muslims in politics, Benhaddou advocates for a distinct Muslim political entity. Recognizing the challenges, particularly due to the diverse nature of Muslims in Belgium, he stresses:

> Undeniably, Muslims form a significant part of Flemish society, numbering around 300,000. And yet, many feel unrepresented. This underscores the need for collective action, to determine our societal role and ensure our Islamic values, harmonious with democratic principles, find representation [34].

Benhaddou feels a distinct lack of representation and sees God as a potential guiding force in politics. He notes a shift away from traditional values, observing that Christian Democratic parties have increasingly distanced themselves from framing God as the cornerstone of morality. This trend, he feels, diminishes the pivotal role of religion as society's moral bedrock. Rik Torfs, a former senator for the Christian Democratic and Flemish party in the Belgian Federal Parliament, expressed similar concerns, highlighting the neglect of Christian foundations in modern discourse.

Articulating his perspective, Benhaddou states, "Religion has historically shaped societal norms. Today's emphasis on unfettered freedom and extreme individualism raises questions about its sustainability. In this aspect, I find some alignment with the views of the Flemish nationalists, who also challenge the narrative of unchecked liberty" [34].

When queried on whether he identifies as a "Muslim democrat", akin to a Christian Democrat, Benhaddou responds that the overlap lies in their shared values. He believes that like him, Christian Democrats look to their faith as a source of guiding principles. "Morality's roots," he asserts, "are embedded in divine guidance, not individual whims" [34].

Despite his assertion that the Flemish political scene lacks genuine representation for Muslims, Benhaddou urges them to be pragmatic voters. He advises Flemish Muslims to support parties that align with

their broader worldview, saying, "I do not abstain from voting. I choose a party that mirrors my beliefs. Beyond being a Muslim, I'm also an educator, and I seek a party that best captures my vision" [34].

From his formative years, Benhaddou consciously steered away from radical and fundamentalist Islam. Throughout the interview, he continuously credits his parents for instilling in him a balanced worldview. This was evident in his youthful days when his interests spanned both the realms of football and Islamic studies. Such a balanced upbringing paved the way for him to embrace a more moderate and inclusive interpretation of Islam. His fluency in Dutch, combined with his age, positioned him uniquely close to the youth.

He mentions, "I resonate deeply with the younger generation here. Their passions are mine. I often find myself amidst them, engaging in conversations over tea, participating in sports, or simply discussing life. Furthermore, I am actively involved in initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between Muslims and the Flemish community. And I emphasize, as an imam, that the events in Iraq and Syria do not reflect the Islam we uphold" [34].

Benhaddou's sermons are distinct, and often centered around contemporary issues,

particularly those that resonate with the youth. He asserts, "In my role as an imam, it is crucial to be attuned to the experiences and challenges of young Muslims in Flanders, so I can address their real-time concerns" [34].

Benhaddou actively stands against jihadist Salafism and the extremities of radical Islam, putting forth

A beardless imam with a suit and tie Accessed at:
https://www.humo.be/nieuws/radicale-moslims-vinden-me-te-verwesterd-radicaal-
rechts-noemt-mij-een-extremist-in-
maatpak~b84cecdd/?referrer=https://www.google.com/

concerted efforts to dissuade the youth from affiliating with the Islamic State or engaging in acts of terror. Reflecting on the motivations of early recruits, he recalls:

> Many early sympathizers claimed their intentions were humanitarian, stating, 'We cannot stand by and watch Assad harm our brethren.' They believed that a Muslim should never forsake fellow believers. To this, I posed a counter: 'Isn't there a way to support these siblings, like raising funds for the White Helmets actively aiding on the ground?' Deradicalization is a step-by-step process. It is not about instantly endorsing the idea of rational Islam. If I had proclaimed, 'Every human being is your sibling,' my message might have fallen on deaf ears [29].

Benhaddou observes that Ghent's absence of IS fighters might owe itself to the dominant Muslim Flemish-Turkish populace, renowned for their moderate interpretation of Islam. He notes, "Notably, the predominant Muslim group in Ghent is Turkish. Their adherence to moderate movements emphasizes a remarkably balanced understanding of Islam" [29].

Furthermore, Benhaddou underscores the necessity for imams to embrace a tempered perspective on Islam and to effectively communicate using the vernacular of the youth. Otherwise, the young will inevitably seek knowledge independently, often stumbling upon misleading and extremist websites. Addressing the question of whether striving for a caliphate is a justifiable jihad from an Islamic standpoint, he firmly states, "From an Islamic perspective, it is not a sanctioned battle. Islam does not condone individuals or factions arbitrarily initiating a jihad" [29].

Benhaddou mentions that his modern approach led some youths to distance themselves From radicalism. "Yet, I remained engaged. Whether at their homes or elsewhere, I often used Quranic verses to encourage introspection and question their beliefs," he says [29].

He draws attention to the UK's approach, "In the UK, they've enlisted Salafists to deradicalize the youth, presuming their ideologies align. But that, in my view, is a perilous dance, akin to playing with fire. The real dilemma lies in discerning our goal: is it merely to deter violence, or do we aspire to offer a renewed

perspective on Islam? And is shaping that perspective the state's responsibility?" [29].

Benhaddou passionately champions the idea of steering youth away from fundamentalism and extremism, urging them to constructively assimilate into their adopted countries. He articulates, "My vision is to harmonize their spiritual leanings with our democratic tenets, reintegrating them into our societal fabric. This equilibrium is unachievable through the prisms of jihadism and Salafism, but feasible with other interpretations of Islam" [29]. He regards spirituality, when rooted in a European-compatible understanding of Islamic tradition, as a vital tool for integration.

Benhaddou, with unwavering commitment, aims to shepherd the youth towards a genuine understanding of Islam. "Empowerment and integration are deeply intertwined with a thorough understanding of one's faith. A divergence from core Islamic principles can lead many astray. The essence lies in embracing and understanding Islam in its true spirit. However, it is concerning that today, there is a palpable absence of resonating voices from the Flemish Muslim community that can guide our youth" [29].

He observes that there is a faction within society keen on amplifying the 'clash of civilizations' narrative, aiming to deepen divides. "It is evident that certain elements thrive on polarization, driving a perception that being Muslim inherently poses challenges to integration within Flanders," Benhaddou notes (Benhaddou interview, 2017). He also underscores the profound implications of racism, emphasizing that it could inadvertently push young individuals towards radicalization. Benhaddou does not hold back in his criticism of politicians who stoke these sentiments. "It is essential to acknowledge the gravity of racism, which often gets minimized from certain perspectives. When notable figures, like Minister Homans, trivialize racism or when individuals like Theo Francken express skepticism about the contributions of specific groups, it does not serve our societal fabric. Such remarks, whether intentional or not, foster an environment where prejudice can flourish" [34].

Benhaddou points out that while the Flemish society often hesitates to confront the issue of racism, its existence cannot be denied. He asserts, "Although the topic might seem distant from some people's everyday experiences, it does not negate its presence. There is ample testimony from many Muslims, supported by various European and international reports, that highlight the pervasive issue of racism in Flanders. It is quite telling that no political party prioritized this concern in the recent elections, perhaps indicating a reluctance to address the underlying currents in Flanders" [34].

He concedes that the term "racism" is sometimes misused, which risks diluting its severity. Responding to the sentiment that some Flemish individuals believe the term is overused, he mentions, "It is true that the term can be deployed too broadly, and this overuse is troubling. It has become a catch-all phrase for many. However, that does not invalidate the real instances of racism. We must refine our understanding of racism and take decisive action against genuine incidents" [34].

Benhaddou adopts a distinctive stance within both Islamic discourse and the European socio-political landscape, challenging conservative interpretations of Islam while simultaneously critiquing the securitization tendencies prevalent in Europe. Unlike the conservative factions within Islam, which might inadvertently resonate with Europe's securitization agenda, Benhaddou advocates for the infusion of divine morality into the political sphere and critiques secularism for fostering societal disconnection and individualistic recklessness. Furthermore, he highlights the strategic vilification of Islam, attributing to it the perpetuation of a 'clash of civilizations' narrative that positions Muslims as perpetual outsiders within European societies. Thus, Benhaddou's perspective simultaneously converges with and diverges from the securitization of Islam in Europe, illustrating a nuanced engagement with these complex dynamics. His approach aligns him with figures like Imam Yassine El Forkani in the Netherlands, marking him as a public intellectual engaged in broader societal dialogues beyond the confines of religious instruction [11].

VII. BENHADDOU'S EMBRACEMENT BY BELGIUM

In 2015, the Belgian post office, Bpost released a stamp featuring Belgian faith leaders, including Khalid Benhaddou, Rabbi Guigui, chief rabbi of Belgium, and the Bishop of Antwerp, Johan Bonny, dressed in their faith's traditional garb, with the aim of promoting religious unity and coexistence. The three figures appear close together with their hands clasping. The slogan on the stamp reads, "Everybody equal, everybody different" [46]. This initiative demonstrates the distinguished position Imam Benhaddou has in Belgium's religious landscape.

The spotlight intensified around the Moroccan-Belgian Imam Khalid Benhaddou in June 2017,

Belgian Stamp featuring Belgian faith leaders, Imam Khalid Benhaddou with

Rabbi Guigui and Bishop Johan Bonny

https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/tolerance.jpg

following a notable visit from King Filip of Belgium to his home. This visit, aimed at sharing an iftar meal during Ramadan with Benhaddou and his family, highlighted the imam's significance within both the Belgian and Muslim communities. A journalist, under the headline "King Filip Joins a Table with a Moroccan Family," observed the relaxed and jovial atmosphere of the event, noting the engaging conversations about Ramadan, the significance of family, the meal, and the place of Muslims in Belgian society [47].

In subsequent media interviews about this royal visit, Benhaddou shared insights into King Filip's intentions and experiences during the iftar. He recounted that the king had expressed a keen interest in experiencing an iftar meal and stayed longer than planned, engaging inquisitively about the practices of Ramadan and expressing personal interest in the family's well-being and cultural integration. Benhaddou felt that the king was very much at ease, highlighting the monarch's genuine curiosity and commendation of his family's upbringing [47].

Further insights from conversations with the online news outlet Alyaoum24 reveal that King Filip was keen to understand how Benhaddou and his family navigate and reconcile their dual Moroccan and Belgian

Belgian <u>King Filip</u> sharing the iftar in Ramadan with the imam
Benhaddou and his family. Accessed at:
https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2017/06/219637/king-philippe-belgium-breaks-fast-moroccan-family

identities [48]. This curiosity points to the King's recognition of Benhaddou as a figure emblematic of successful integration within Belgium.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

Born and educated in Belgium, Benhaddou has distinguished himself through his interactions with both Turkish and Moroccan Muslim communities in Ghent, not limiting his critiques to any one group but extending them to Flemish natives, politicians, and the broader Muslim community alike. His approach diverges from that of traditional imams, as he weaves themes of democracy and human rights into his religious discourse, reflecting a nuanced engagement with contemporary societal issues. This balanced but forthright stance has resulted in polarized opinions about him. As he articulates in an interview with De Morgen, "Radical Muslims find me too Westernized," and conversely, "the radical right calls me 'an extremist in a suit'" [29].

Benhaddou champions the idea that Flemish Islam should be shaped by individuals who are not just born, raised, and educated in Flanders but are deeply rooted in its culture and societal norms, moving away from the dependence on external, foreign influences. While recognizing the historical necessity for European Muslims of past generations to be led by imams from their countries of origin, Benhaddou views this as a practice whose time has passed. He argues for a leadership that is fluent in Dutch and possesses a deep understanding of life in Flanders, to ensure that the interpretation of Islam they provide resonates with the local context and realities, marking a shift towards a more integrated and contextual form of Islamic leadership.

Benhaddou advocates for a vision of Flemish Islam that synthesizes religious tenets with rational thought, aiming to provide Muslims in Europe with a framework that facilitates their integration into European society. He maintains a firm belief in the enduring value of religion as a source of ethical guidance and societal cohesion, even in the contemporary era.

As a vocal opponent of conservative strains of Islam, particularly Salafism, Benhaddou is deeply engaged in efforts to deradicalize youth. He asserts that the conflicts pursued by IS are not reflective of the broader Muslim community's struggles. While some, like Elforkani, may view Salafism as simply an orthodox interpretation of Islam, Benhaddou contends that it is incompatible with the cultural and societal context of Europe. He supports state intervention in shaping the Islamic religious sphere to limit the influence of ideologies such as Salafism. Concurrently, he endeavors to reinterpret Sharia in a manner that underscores its congruence with European values and legal standards, when viewed within an appropriate context.

Benhaddou also recognizes racism within Flemish society as a factor contributing to the radicalization of Muslims. He perceives religion and politics as inherently linked, with faith playing a critical role in defining societal norms and values. He critiques the push for headscarf bans in a multicultural context as not only hypocritical but also as a distraction from the real issues faced by European Muslims, particularly in Flanders. In Benhaddou's perspective, such debates are anachronistic and detract from addressing the substantive challenges confronting the Muslim community in Europe.

Benhaddou embodies a revolutionary figure striving not only to reform Islamic thought but also to reshape European perceptions of Islam and its Muslim community, as well as the broader societal attitudes of European citizens. He levels criticism at the prevailing securitization mentality within governmentality, which defensively positions Muslims through persistent inquiries about headscarves, face veils, and views on homosexuality, or through the reduction of Muslim Europeans to merely their religious identities. Benhaddou advocates for the inclusion of divine morality in politics, critiquing perspectives that narrowly interpret Sharia as punitive rather than disciplinary. Yet, in his calls for the Belgian government to structure Islam and his rejection of conservative Islam—which he views as incompatible with secularism and alienating to European Muslims who hold conservative views—Benhaddou also navigates the terrain of the very securitization he critiques.

This study, while centered on an imam, does not purport that imams are the pivotal element for the integration of Muslim communities, countering the assumptions of some research that overemphasizes imam training as a universal solution to challenges of integration and Islamic extremism. Such a stance is overly simplistic. Imams, contrary to some perceptions, occupy a vulnerable position within religious hierarchies, not as divinely appointed leaders but as employees beholden to the demands of their communities, states, or both. Thus, enhancing the legal status of imams is as crucial as improving their educational background.

Moreover, the study contends that the strains on European social cohesion should not be primarily attributed to the deficiencies of imams. Instead, these strains arise from the broader vulnerabilities ushered in by globalization, which impacts societies universally, transcending economic or developmental distinctions.

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