Seven critical events regarding Islam and Muslims in Norway - Three points of tension

Siete acontecimientos críticos en relación con el Islam y los musulmanes en Noruega: tres puntos de tensión

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Abstract

The paper explores the development of attitudes and relationships toward Islam and Muslims in the Norwegian public context, as expressed in various central media and research. These processes are captured through analysing seven events decided to be ‘critical’ in the sense of having especial importance for such relationships. The processes evolve back and forth in the tensions between a three poled triangle: right wing extremism, Muslim extremism and what we have termed “extreme universalism”. Very few actors associate to its outer levels, as most social life occurs in between those extremities, where conviviality seems to be an overall direction.

Key words: Critical Events, Norway, Muslims, Polarisation, Conviviality

Resumen

El artículo explora el desarrollo de las actitudes hacia el islam y las relaciones con los musulmanes en el contexto público noruego, tal y como se expresan en diversos medios de comunicación e investigación académica, mediante el análisis de siete acontecimientos considerados “críticos” por su especial impacto. El avance y retroceso de tales procesos se sitúa en un triángulo de tres polos: el extremismo de derechas, el extremismo musulmán y lo que hemos denominado convivialidad “extrema”. Dentro de sus límites se desarrolla la mayor parte de la vida social, ya que la convivialidad “moderada” parece ser la tendencia general.

Palabras clave: Acontecimientos Críticos, Noruega, Musulmanes, Polarización, Convivialidad

Context: Why Norway?

Compared to the other participating nations in the QUEST project, Norway is a small country. While cities like Madrid have 6.7 million, London has 9.1 million and Paris has 7.2 million, the Norwegian nation has around 5 million inhabitants. Norway is rich due to its until now oil driven economy; it represents the Scandinavian type of social democracy, characterised by a relatively developed welfare state, including free education; strong ideals of equality, especially regarding gender (Skilbrei, 2020; Bendixen et al., 2018); a relatively absent colonialisist past (with some exceptions) – in contrast to QUEST’s three other countries – and relatively recent immigration that started in the 1970ies. Another important feature is the absence – with one possible
exception – of any largescale Muslim terror event. On the other hand, two large scale terror attacks from right wing extremists – one fulfilled, one failed attempt – have heavily contributed to the tension in the Norwegian public where immigration and especially Muslims have a foremost role (see below).

18.5 percent of Norway’s inhabitants (in 2018) had an immigrant background. 14.8 percent of the population were immigrants, while 3.6 percent were born in Norway to immigrant parents. Although there are immigrants living all over Norway, most inhabitants of immigrant background are found in the areas in and around the municipality of the capital of Oslo, where they make up 33.1 percent of the population today. The first immigrants who arrived in the 1970s, mostly had a Pakistani background. By 2019 the origins of the five largest groups of immigrants and Norwegians born to immigrant parents were: Poland (2.10%); Lithuania (0.84%); Somalia (0.80%); Sweden (0.73%); and Pakistan (0.71%). Muslims comprise around 4 percent of the inhabitants in Norway (Kulturdepartementet, 2020: 10), and here, just like in other European contexts, populations that were previously defined by national origin or socio-economic and legal categories, have increasingly been referred to in religious terms as Muslims (Brubaker, 2013: 2).

As we here will explore what we understand as “critical events” (see below) in relation to public images of Muslims and Islam in Norwegian society over the past decades we will pay attention both to general societal changes as well as to some salient generational changes within the Muslim population (Jacobsen, 2011). Descendants of immigrants must negotiate a sense of belonging in political landscapes where they, just like their parents, tend to be seen as foreigners (Phoenix, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Consequently, they carry with them experiences of what Paul Gilroy ([1993] 2004) terms double consciousness: a feeling of being both inside and outside the nation. Most descendants of immigrants in Norway are still young, but statistics indicate that significant changes are taking place between them and the parental generation regarding integration in education, employment and income level (Reisel et al., 2019), as well as in their organization of family and everyday lives (Aarset, 2015; Kitterød and Nadim, 2020; Aarset et al., 2021). Such generational changes also speak to the bigger picture presented in the public debate. Within the Nordic Welfare states, where gender equality and children’s self-determination tend to be seen as prime values (Skilbrei, 2020; Bendixen et al., 2018), various societal institutions and actors are also paying close attention to descendants of immigrants in order to evaluate the eventual success in the integration – especially regarding gender issues – often presented as a potential threat to Norwegian core values. As a consequence of this social control of gender relations and belonging – from the majority society as well as from minority communities (Rosten and Smette, 2021) – young Muslims growing up in Norway, and eventually becoming parent themselves (Aarset et al., 2021), often struggle with their identity work as Norwegian Muslims. Therefore we argue that societal change, Muslim generational change and the descendant’s gendered identity work in public arenas constitute a crucial issue for understanding the developments analysed below.

Survey data on attitudes towards Muslims – from 2017 – suggest considerable levels of hostility within the majority population (Moe (ed.), 2022). While it is likely that the attitudes to Muslims are part of a larger picture of anti-immigrant attitudes, Islam and Muslims tend to be seen as representing the “most alien” to what is seen as “Norwegian
culture” and identity (see, for example, Storhaug, 2015; Alghasi, 2020). These negative attitudes are not surprisingly reflected in the experiences of Muslims living in Norway. Survey data suggest that 35% of Muslims have the feeling that they do not belong in Norwegian society, “often or sometimes”, 27% had experienced people behaving negatively towards them once their religious belonging was known and 14% had experienced explicit harassment (Kulturdepartementet, 2020: 20-21). This points out that the skepticism, suspicion and negativity directed toward Muslims is considerable and that the burden of these negative attitudes is felt by a significant number of Muslims.

However, in a new report published in 2022, several findings point in directions of more positive relationships toward Muslims in recent years when compared to the survey from 2017 (Moe (ed.), 2022). For example, while 19.6% of the population sample in 2017 are negative to social contact with Muslims, this is reduced to 15.3% in 2022. In 2022 33% supports both the statements that “Muslims pose a threat to Norwegian culture” and “Muslims do not fit into modern Western society”, while in 2017 the answers to the first were 39% and 36% to the second statement. The overall tendency toward a more positive relation toward Muslims is further shown in that a majority of 62% of the population sample in 2022 supports the statement that “Muslims are good Norwegian citizens”, compared to 54% in 2017 (all figures from Moe (ed.), 2022).

In light of such a development toward more positive attitudes, our overall research question will therefore be: which societal developments can eventually be identified as drivers toward or against such positive attitudes? Here we will explore some larger societal developments as they unfold and manifest in our analysis of a series of what have been termed “critical events”. But first, some comments on the overall polarisation.

**Oslo, Norway – Three points of tension**

The situation for Muslims in Norway can only be understood as related to a wider, transnational context. Polarisation, tensions and at times also direct political violence are all phenomena pointed to as characteristic elements of our times (see, for example Bauman, 2007; Griffin, 2012; Traverso, 2019; Fukuyama, 2020, 2019; Reckwitz, 2020). In its transnational extremes, we find terror, wars, invasions and political violence in many forms. In the case of extremist Muslims we have seen the 9.11 attacks, the bombs in London and Madrid, the massacre in Bataclan and Charlie Hebdo in Paris, the caricature tumults, the atrocities of IS in Syria, to name a few, and the reactions of retaliation by especially the US, in the shape of the invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Bagram and Guantanamo, their continuous support of the state of Israel in the Israel – Palestinian conflict, and the overall “war on terror”. From a wider perspective there are also the persecutions of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and the treatment of the Uighurs in China (see, for example, Nesser, 2015). The critique and emotional reactions to these grievances also point beyond the extremist groups, as they are shared by large milieus far beyond the violent extremist networks.

In the second extreme of this landscape of polarisation, we also see the rise of radical and extremist right-wing networks, single actors and organisations in a wide range of
European countries, where immigrants, and especially Muslims are the primary targets (Ravndal, 2021; Vestel, 2016, 2020; Vestel and Ali, 2021; Pilkington and Vestel, 2021). Here, the July 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2011 attacks in Norway are well known, as are also the Koran burnings in Denmark and Sweden, but there are also several others in various countries as described by Ravndal in his overview of fatal right-wing attacks from 1990-2020 (Ravndal, 2021). At times the right wing reactions also point beyond the extremist groups, as it further manifests in the forming of political parties – between the moderate to the extreme – also in the middle of the political power, such as, for example, Orban in Hungary, the PIS party of Poland, the Golden Dawn in Greece, Le Pen (and recently Zemmour) in France, Wilders in the Netherlands, AFD in Germany, the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, Meloni in Italy, Trump in the US, radical right wing religious evangelical fundamentalists in the US (see, for example, Traverso, 2019).

Both Muslim terrorists and right wing terrorists are clearly manifested in the concrete examples pointed out above.

However, also a third position is present in the form of an opposite to these first two, in the direction of depolarisation; from this position the two extremist strands and the ideas of a war between Islam and the West are more or less clearly dismissed. In its most realist form, the third position can be seen as pointing toward what has been coined – by Paul Gilroy many years ago – as “conviviality”, representing a situation/a mode where cultural differences are handled and negotiated to a more moderate level of tensions, and where to “be at ease” with diversity, is both felt, handled, tolerated and experienced as something real (Gilroy, 2004; see also Hemer et al. (eds.), 2019). Here the searching for – at least – something like a “lowest common denominator” is an important orientation, implying that one has to let go, avoid, reduce or dampen the most antagonist differences to find somewhere to meet.

But also the ideal of conviviality may go beyond the moderate and be taken to an “extreme”, in the shape of an abstract ideal of a totally friction-free relationship between the involved ethnic groups. Such a position we term “extreme universalism”. This may be seen as when searching of conviviality to find something like a common ground is taken so far as cultural differences and the feeling of some continuity with the past ideally tend to be (unrealistically) ignored, in the sense that cultural difference is denied, sought eliminated and handled as irrelevant. So while the two first extremisms can be seen as accentuating difference to the point of seeking to eliminate – including physically destroying – the Other, extreme universalism, may be seen as refusing to pay attention to cultural difference at all, and thus, to the power relations defining them.

Important to notice; while both right wing and Muslim extremism are represented by concrete actors, – as we soon shall see – the position of extreme universalism has no representatives in this article. It is rather to be seen as an abstract and more or less impossible ideal, an outer point, toward which an actor may stretch in different degrees, but that hardly anyone may or wish to reach, as it demands something like a human without culture, that is – in an almost “antisepic” sense – without a past. So while the identity of being a Muslim may be taken into an extremist version when it accepts violence and terror to achieve its goals, and right wing position becomes extremist by the same criterion, also the position of conviviality may pass the limit to the extreme when it refuses the marks (attitudes, values, world views) of culture in a totalising sense.
This sketches an overall landscape of a triangle where these three extremes – each representing a continuum from the moderate to the extreme – are in a relationship of tension with each other. In the first pole, we find the radical Muslim position (anti-West, religiously fundamentalist, antidemocratic, xenophobic, antifeminist, religio-nationalist) where also here terror – in its extremist version – to reach political goals is accepted. In the second pole, there is the radical right wing (anti-Islam(ist), anti-immigration, antidemocratic, antifeminist, xenophobic, hyper nationalist) where also terror – in its most extreme version – to reach the political goals is accepted. In the third pole we find the very negation of the two others, that is, in the ideal of conviviality, but taken into a destructive extreme universalism when cultural difference is ignored.

These poles of extremity we see as forming a triangular shaped landscape of tensions, where very few actors associate to their outer levels, but where social life can be seen as going on – to various degrees – in the field of tensions between them.

In many smaller contexts – on the levels of the nation, the city or the neighbourhood – this overall situation, with transnational impulses, crossings and complex connections becomes what we may understand as a “resonance board” where these tensions tend to manifest in a wide spectrum of impulses; at times as a mere ambience, an atmosphere, a mode, a hunch, as something felt, or – in other versions – in the shape of a more consciously registered presence, including hard confrontations and relations of power.

We thus believe that most people in Norway, no matter their generational belonging or status as non-Muslim majority or Muslim minority, live their lives under the influence of these three extreme positions. How and to what extent this is reflected in their everyday life, however, remains an empirical question for further research.

In this article, we aim to encircle and analyse the emergence of some central components of this situation as it is manifested in the relationships and discourses around Islam and Muslims in the Norwegian public, with a special focus upon the role of what has been termed “critical events” (see Rogstad and Vestel, 2011; Das, 1995; Søkefelt, 2006).

Critical events

We see a series of “critical events” as having a central role in the developments toward the present state of the overall ambience regarding Islam and Muslims in Norwegian society. These are events on “both sides” of the spectrum, where extremist right wing, extremist Islam and the extreme universalist position represent the outer limits. According to Rogstad and Vestel (2011), building on Das (1995) and Søkefelt (2006), a “critical event” is an event that is somehow experienced as having – through some subjectively felt resonance with certain experiential patterns – a special ability to create new references, new knowledge, new identifications and differentiations in such way that they mark a difference between “before” and “after”, thereby catalysing some sort of change (Rogstad and Vestel, 2011: 246; see also Andersson et al., 2012: 13; Vestel and Ali, 2021). This may manifest on several levels; in individual lives, or on more collective
levels where local, national and transnational events become critical in a similar sense, that is, as drivers of social change.

In the present text, the view on critical events as something that necessarily implies change on a societal or individual level, will not be applied in a stricter sense. Rather, it is simply seen as an event of special importance, on the one hand, for attitudes toward Islam and Muslims in various non-Muslim public spheres, and, on the other, for the relations generated in various Muslim milieus themselves, toward the larger society.

While there is a long row of critical events in recent Norwegian history that imply relationships, critique and also violence directed against the multicultural society, including Islam and Muslims, the seven events we here have chosen are considered to be of special importance for the views, attitudes and general ambience related to Muslims and Islam in the overall Norwegian public, as they all, also, had long and important influences of special relevance in their aftermaths, as an important criterion for selection. They will all be discussed one by one below. There are, obviously, a long list of other events that could expand and deepen our exploration, for example, such as reactions to the various terror attacks listed above. Nevertheless, some choices are required, even if they could all be contested, depending of the aspects and themes one wish to illuminate. In addition, the space limits of this article format, also limits the number of examples for analyses.

In the analyses of these events both academic resources and the more wider media comments are discussed. The media referred to is primarily centred around the three largest mainstream oriented newspapers in Norway; Aftenposten that is the largest, and the two tabloids, VG and Dagbladet. Earlier on they had all a more explicit political affiliation: Aftenposten was traditionally moderately right wing and conservatively oriented. Dagbladet has traditionally presented itself as within a cultural radical/social liberal direction, while VG traditionally has been seen as a bit more right wing and conservative than Dagbladet. But while these are still at least slightly valid tendencies, the overall developments point in a direction where they all resemble each other. Such a view is also confirmed by, for example, Wilhelmsen (2017). We have therefore not focused upon the differences between these newspapers, well in line with the most recent relevant research on the media and minorities – including Islam and Muslims – in Norway, as in Alghasi, Eide and Simonsen (2020).

1. 1993. The Nygaard case – Khomeiny’s fatwa versus Rushdie’s text on Norwegian soil?

In 1989, following the publication The Satanic Verses by Salman Rushdie, Iran’s leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, declared a fatwa demanding that the author should be executed because the book was seen as a blasphemy against Islam. Four years later, in 1993, William Nygaard – the Norwegian publisher of The Satanic Verses – was attempted murdered outside his own home in the outskirts of Oslo, by actors presumed to be motivated by Khomeini’s fatwa (Tjelmeland and Brochman, 2003: 346-347; Isungset, 2010). For many years of police investigation, the perpetrator(s) were not found, and
their identity are still unclear. This event was the first, – although small scale, and to this
day, the only, with the exception of the attacks on the Pride event mentioned earlier –
Islam related physical terror act encountered on Norwegian soil (see also Alghasi, 2020:
143-146).

The Nygaard case, naturally, created strong reactions in the Norwegian public, both in
the newspapers and was also referred to in academic texts. It directed the attention
toward radical Islamists and is described as having made Muslims in Norway feel that
they had to answer for the fatwa as a “test on loyalty and foundational values”
(translation by the authors, Tjelmeland and Brochman, 2003: 346-347; Alghasi, 2020).

As Eriksen writes in 2013:

“Concerns about migration, which had once largely been on economic
grounds, took on a cultural and religious focus following the Rushdie affair
in 1988 and the end of the Cold War. This was exacerbated after the 9/11
attacks on the United States [...] Generalising statements about Muslims
have become common in the media, even if frequently countered by more
nuanced or opposing views. In contemporary Norway, ‘the other’ is now
a Muslim – if a man, a possible perpetrator, if a woman, a potential victim”.
(Eriksen, 2013: 10)

In 2018 – almost 25 years since the murder attempt, and only some days before the case
should have been declared “obsolete” – the Norwegian police are charging five foreign
citizens from what the police termed a “fundamentalist” milieu, for the murder attempt.
At present, more information about who and where is not known to the public.

It is our impression that this event has not been closely analysed and commented in
Norwegian academic literature. This may perhaps be due to the fact that the original
fatwa had already been condemned by a large international public, and that – apart from
the undoubtedly shocking event on Norwegian soil – the murder attempt was so
obviously seen as a crime, and on a smaller scale than the later large scale right wing
terror, and therefore escaped a wider academic analysis.

The media: Based of studying the media coverage of the case, Alghasi points out four
central discourses describing the role of Muslims in the Norwegian public as important
outcomes (Alghasi, 2020: 145). The first is a discourse of threat, that implies that even
actors in Norwegian soil could be threatened by Islam related violence. The second that
is a discourse of loyalty, implies that Muslims could be suspected of supporting both the
attitudes and – in the most radical cases – also the violence expressed in the “fatwa”,
and thereby express a lack of loyalty toward what is seen as Norwegian (European,
Western) values. The third is a discourse of freedom of speech where what is viewed as
one of the most basic premises for a well-functioning Western democracy is challenged
and threatened by Islam. The fourth is a discourse of victimisation where a Norwegian
“we” must beware of Muslims as an overall potential threat against our values and
lifestyle. A distinction between the first and the fourth seems unclear. We therefore
prefer to see the first and the fourth as one, that is as a discourse of threat. One more
discourse has already been mentioned by Eriksen, in the case of the Islam related gender
discourse where the Muslim male tends to be seen as what Vestel and Ali has termed a
“Male Muslim Monster” and the Muslim woman as a victim (Vestel and Ali, 2021: 53).
These four discourses will to some degree resonate as our text unfolds. Our next case will illuminate especially the gender discourse more frontally.


One of the aspects of Islam and assumed Muslim practices that was especially highlighted in the Norwegian media and public in the years following the Nygard/Rushdie case, was gender related practices and attitudes (Wikan, 2001, 2008; Gullestad, 2006; Eide, 2020). In this period a series of cases that was seen as female suppression in various manifestations, considered at odds with Norwegian ideology of gender equality, was brought to the Norwegian public, well in line with Eriksen’s earlier statement (Thorbjørnsrud, 2003: 2).

An important event feeding into this discursive logic was the moral uproar surrounding the “Kadra case” in 2000. Kadra Yusuf, a 19-year-old woman from Oslo with Somali family background went under-cover with a sound recorder to reveal support of female genital cutting among imams with African background. The documentary broadcasted by one of the larger Norwegian television channels (TV 2) revealed how the Imams, rather than taking their distance to the practice of female genital cutting (FGC), advised her to respect her parents’ wishes. What particularly caused public uproar in this case was that one of the imams consulted, Kebba Secka, was a respected public figure at the time, and strongly involved in religious dialogue as the leader of the Norwegian Islamic council. Central politicians of all political parties condemned both the practice of FGC and the imams interviewed. The media coverage tended to focus on FGC as an assumed Islamic rather than a cultural practice. At the time it seemed almost impossible to criticise the documentary or to defend the imams involved in public (Talle, 2003). In the Norwegian public Yusuf has ever since held a position as a true heroine – a symbolic bearer of “Norwegian” tolerance and gender equality (Engebrigtsen and Fuglerud, 2009: 19-23). Secka on the other hand came out as the villain, as he was immediately excluded from the government’s intercultural Value Commission.

Yusuf can be seen as a forerunner of a long row of young Muslim women expressing criticism in public directed at ethnic and/or Muslim communities, encouraged by the majority (Eide, 2020; Gullestad, 2006). Many other examples in the years following the Kadra case could have been mentioned here. Over time and especially more recently – as we shall see – young women with Muslim family background, religious or not, have also been criticising the stereotypical “concerns” of the non-Muslim majority, directed against the assumed ways of doing gender in Muslim milieus.

One of the researchers behind the documentary was the journalist Hege Storhaug, who at the time had already written a book (Storhaug, 1998) and made TV-documentaries on forced marriage and honour killings in Norway. The public uproar caused by the documentary involving young Kadra thus represented a central issue motivating
Storhaug’s founding – in 2001 – of the soon to become controversial think tank called “Human Rights Service”. This organization declared the aim of contributing to better integration of immigrants, and preventing violation of human rights (see below, see Alghasi, 2020: 88-89).

However, Kadra Yusuf and several other young women who in this period were involved with Storhaug as victims of suppressive gender practices, later accused her of exploiting them and putting undue pressure on young people in difficult life situations. On the other hand, Storhaug claimed that she had done “nothing but carrying these delicate baby birds around so that no one could get to them” (translation by the authors, VG, 28.02.2002).

The Kadra-case may thus be seen as exemplifying a doubleness. First it points clearly to both the discourses and realities of victimisation of women under the patriarchy of some minority communities, and in this case male religious leaders. In many ways this event thus seemed to further articulate a form of polarization in the public debate, causing some kind of moral panics in the then strongly majority dominated public, encouraging Norwegian Muslims to “choose side” – either “tradition” and “Islamic values” or “modernity” and “Norwegian values”. At the same time, the very acts of 19-year-old Yusuf also exemplifies a young female defending her rights as a member of the “gender equal” majority society, notably in the role of a strong agent rather than a passive victim. Thus the example also represents a possible way out pointing toward a depolarising (the third) position even if the immediate result were polarisation and a possibly growing Islamophobia. By engaging on the public scene in this way Kadra opened up for feminist activism from an ethnic and religious minority position, and thus underlining the possibility to combine them. This points also to the role of conviviality for cultural creativity.

(Further into time, 9/11 happened and became perhaps the largest turning point – the most critical event, so to speak – for almost all Muslims in the times that follow, where also far reaching theories of conspiracy emerge, as will be touched upon in our next section.)


The “Progress Party” (FRP) was founded in 1973, under a different name, and is the country’s oldest immigration critical political party. It has in many ways influenced Norwegian politics right from its start, not least, through supplying the Norwegian public with a certain expression that has led a long-term life since its first occurrence in 2009. At that point in time, the Progress Party’s leader, Siv Jensen, held a speech under a party congregation where she is reported to have stated that “the reality is that one nowadays is about to allow a form of sneaky Islamisation in the Norwegian society. This we have to stop. The demands are coming, and they come in a row. Halalfood in the jail. Is this the way it has to be?” (translation by the authors, quoted in Alghasi, 2020: 154).

With this speech the word “sneaky Islamisation” (in Norwegian: “snikislamisering”) entered the Norwegian political landscape. The concept is denoting a process whereby
Islam and Muslim values in “sneaky” and almost non registerable ways are replacing Western and Norwegian values and attitudes. This imaginary – as various researchers have emphasised – is well in line with the so called Eurabia theory, first coined by right wing actor named Bat Ye’or (see for example Bangstad, 2019; Vestel, 2016). The expression has also been supported and pointed to by most of the different Norwegian radical right-wing groups in the various alternative media. They have been eager in giving examples such as: the use of hijab in contexts like the army and the customs; the will to replace Christmas-rituals in schools to avoid provoking Muslims; segregated lessons at school; the use of female Muslim dress; halal kitchen; Muslim homes for the elderly; prayer rooms in workplaces, and the like (Alghasi, 2020: 158-159). In these ways, Alghasi claims that it develops a mutual recognition between radical right wing, anti-Islam organisations, webpages and networks, and the right-wing side in Norwegian party politics, primarily in the shape of the Progress party (ibid.). Not least in the mentioned radical right wing think tank, Human Rights Service, the expression has found a faithful supporter, and in the group SIAN (Stop Islamisation of Norway), and their demos where the Koran is destroyed in various heavily provocative ways (Vestel, 2016, 2020; Vestel and Ali, 2021).

In 2015, HRS’ most profiled leader of its information department, Hege Storhaug, published a book with the telling title “Islam. The 11th plague”, where the idea of “sneaky Islamisation” has been given solid attention. HRS has received public funding until 2021, which has caused constant political controversy over the years, and particularly in the aftermath of 22 July 2011. HRS – that still exists in 2024 – publishes books, gives lectures, participates in debates where their heavily Islam critical standpoints are presented, and where gender related issues are often foregrounded (Alghasi, 2020: 88-89). Well in line with Progress party’s overall politics, the party has supported the public financing of HRS over the years (Bangstad and Helland, 2019).

The media: Alghasi characterises “sneaky Islamisation” as “one of the strongest rhetorical concepts” in the debate around immigration and in the Islam-critical debate in present days’ Norway (Alghasi, 2020: 155). But while there can be no doubt that extremist Muslims have expressed the desire to take over Western societies, the problem arises when more everyday activities, including elementary politeness and tolerance, are seen as expressions within such a frame and when they tend to be generalised as valid also for ordinary Muslims with more moderate positions (see Vestel and Ali, 2021). Well in line with the history of the concept, it is still used and held forth as useful by the new, and present leader of the Progress Party, Sylvi Listhaug.

The overall messages from both the populist and the radical right in various alternative media seem to refer to all the referred discourses of anti-Islam/anti-Muslim content that researchers of the Norwegian context have identified to this point, strongly contributing to polarisation.

Nevertheless, there are also several examples of well recognized mainstream politicians’ critique against the expression showing that actors who were more associated with the depolarisation position, are also clearly present in the debates over this concept.
4. **2009. Gaza demos – Israeli state terror, the emergence of new Muslim voices and a think tank for minority politics**

From December 2008 to January 2009, Israeli planes were bombing Gaza in what was known as “Operation Cast Lead”, in a three-weeks conflict between Palestinian paramilitary groups and the Israeli army. Between 1,166 / 1,417 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed. The disproportions in these numbers are telling.

Demos were arranged in various parts of the world. In Norway, especially the almost daily media reports from two Norwegian doctors – Mads Gilbert and Erik Fosse – were heavily engaging (see Vestel, 2016: 158-159). They were both working in the Shifa hospital with the numerous victims on the Palestinian side, and were documented – also on television – as they were surrounded by bloody, wounded and dead children and grownups, while they were commenting on the situation at a time when all international journalists were refused entrance to the area by the Israeli state (ibid.).

Especially in Oslo several thousand protesters of highly diverse backgrounds took to the streets (Andersson et al., 2012: 88; Jacobsen and Andersson, 2012; Rogstad and Vestel, 2011). In other words, the rage against the Israeli attacks generated protests and reactions that involved a much wider range of participants than young Muslims, and thereby also created bridges and expanded the public arena to include groups and citizens that had little contact in their everyday lives. Here, slogans that praised God (Takbir – Allahu Akbar) occurred side by side with “boycott Israel” (Andersson et al., 2012: 95). But also racism and discrimination against both immigrants and Muslims in Norwegian society were addressed. The demos thus seemed to create a sense of community among the younger “second generation” (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001) of Norwegian Muslims and several non-Muslims who were standing up for Palestinians (including both Muslims and Christians) in particular, strongly representing the direction of conviviality.

It is widely known that the critique against the Israeli state is also supported by several prominent bishops in the Norwegian (protestant) church, including their leader (archbishop), Olav Fykse Tveit, and in the assembly of bishops in May 2020, they clearly criticized the Israeli state’s annexation of Palestinian land on the West bank. With such a wide support – including the real and indeed spectacular role of the two mentioned doctors – the agencies representing a position of depolarisation here must be seen as considerable.

The media: In the aftermath of these demos several “new voices” from various milieus of young Muslims emerged with strong agency in the public debate in the newspapers, where their identity as young Muslims was held forth, not least through a series of so called “dialogue meetings”, organized by Abid Raja, then a young lawyer and politician of Pakistani background – later to become no less than the minister of culture (2020-2021) – where many of the young angry Muslims attended to discuss both Gaza and politics in general (see also Raja, 2021; Andersson et al., 2012). Several years after the event, the importance of the demonstrations against the Gaza war are still referred to...
by young Muslims, not least in the more radical milieus explored by Vestel (see Vestel, 2016: 158-159) and Vestel and Ali (Vestel and Ali, 2021).

From these meetings, Raja – who also may be considered a role model, for more liberal Muslims – started the foundation/think tank called “MinotenK” in 2010, that in 2023 is still an important actor in minority political matters, and who publishes books, gives lectures, participates in debates and media discussions related to minorities and integration, and where Islam and Muslims are important parts of their overall focus. While the Israeli war against Palestinians expressed hard hostility against what Muslims tended to see as the Muslim world, the Gaza demos and the developments in their aftermaths can thus be seen as strengthening a unifying counter-community and thereby the third, and depolarising position. The next event points mainly in the opposite direction, creating more negativity toward Islam.

5. **2010. Demo against newspaper drawing of the Prophet as a pig – Polarisation, warnings and the emergence of a new Muslim extremist group**

The development toward a more polarised situation regarding Islam reached a new peak when a major Norwegian newspaper, *Dagbladet*, published a photograph of a PC screen showing a satirical cartoon of a pig with the name “Mohammad” written on it in 2010 (Andersson et al., 2012). This must obviously be seen on the background of the world-wide reactions in the Muslim worlds, against the publications in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten*, of the famous caricatures of the prophet Mohamed, for example as portrayed with a bomb in his turban in August 2005 (see Eide, 2020: 38-39).

After the publication in *Dagbladet*, a group of angry, young Muslims then arranged a large demonstration in the centre of Oslo. Here, Mohyeldeen Mohammad (24 years old, Iraqi background) – who later became one of the first Syrian fighters from Norway – gave a speech where he warns the Norwegian public that a September 11th’ may happen on Norwegian soil, as a reaction to, among other things, the publication of the cartoon (see Andersson et al., 2012: 248; Vestel, 2016; Akerhaug, 2013; Linge and Bangstad, 2020). Especially that statement created much attention in the overall Norwegian public.

From that demonstration and the milieu arranging it, a group of young radical Muslims emerged calling themselves the “Prophet’s Ummah” (see also Andersson et al., 2012; Nesser, 2015; Vestel, 2016; Linge and Bangstad, 2020; Sandberg et al., 2018; Vestel and Ali, 2021). In various arenas, the Prophet’s Ummah declared support for well-known terrorist actions, on social media and in interviews with the press. The terror attack on the In Amenas gas plant in Eastern Algeria, where 23 hostages were killed, among them five Norwegian workers; the bomb attack on Boston Marathon, where three were killed and 260 wounded; the attack on the Westgate mall in Nairobi – where also a young Norwegian jihadist participated – where 67 were killed and 200 hurt (Akerhaug, 2015); and the murder of British Afghan war veteran, Lee Rigby; all these terror actions were supported and acclaimed in this group. The group also had as their mentor the British...
lawyer, Anjem Choudary – the former leader of the group “Al-Muhajiroun” –, which was banned after it was assumed to have links to Al-Qaeda, and another banned group “Islam4 UK” (Linge and Bangstad, 2020; Wiktorowicz, 2005: 90-91).

The demo, the utterances by Mohyeldeen Mohamad, and the emerging of a group like the Prophet’s Ummah thus became important parts in the further development of an overall polarisation, and not least, charging the overall ambience with fear, which was also strongly nourished with the transnational terror actions undertaken by extremist Muslims (see for example Nesser, 2015). This demo was nevertheless also heavily discussed among Muslims, where the more moderate – obviously a highly important point – were distancing themselves from the radical core.

The media: Even if so clearly elicited by a publication in one of the country’s largest newspaper the demo in Oslo in 2010, its medial repercussions are not mentioned by Eide, Alghasi or Simonsen in their 2020 publication. And even if this demo in the Norwegian public took place as much as five years after the publications of the caricatures case in Jylland Posten, it nevertheless represents a highly important event in recent Norwegian history – obviously also strengthened by the earlier caricature event – where the Muslim faith, to many Muslims in the Norwegian society, was felt as being severely attacked and humiliated. Also here, a range of new voices among young Muslims appeared – also as possible new role models – in the Norwegian public (see Andersson et al., 2012; Linge and Bangstad, 2020).

With this event, several anti-Muslim discourses are activated. The most obvious is the provocation against the discourse of free speech. Secondly, the discourse where Islam and Muslims are seen as a threat against Western/Norwegian society. The discourse of fear/threat is utterly amplified in its aftermath, with the emergence of the Prophet’s Ummah, and their open support and celebration of extreme terror actions in various parts of the world. In such a perspective, the event amplifies the situation of polarisation, and takes it even some steps further away from the conviviality pole.

A year after, the situation of polarisation got a new and even more frightening element, but this time in the shape of right-wing terror.


In July 2011 Anders Behring Breivik (32) exploded a government building in the centre of Oslo killing eight people, and then killed 69 young people attending the labour party’s summer camp in the island of Utøya, one hour’s drive from Oslo. In his so-called manifesto, this was explained as an act of protest against the multicultural direction of Norway and the politicians who facilitated it (e.g. Borchgrevinck, 2012; Bangstad, 2014 Vestel, 2016, 2018, 2020; Bjørø and Ravik Jupskås (eds.), 2021; Børstad et al. (eds.), 2021). According to Breivik “the aim was to strike the Labour Party who Islamized Norway” (quoted in Notaker, 2021: 114). In his Manifest he terms all Norwegian political parties – except the Progress party – as part of a western European “Marxist-
“V. Vestel and M. Rosten, “Seven critical events regarding Islam and Muslims in Norway...”

/multiculturalist-alliance”, and also as an “Eurabian alliance” (Notaker, 2021: 115; see also Sætre’s 2013 book on Breivik’s ideologue called “Fjordman”). In other words, even if the acts were directed against the multicultural society in general, Islam and Muslims were pointed at as especially alien to Norwegian society. Notably, during the hours after the bombing of the city centre, before the identity of the terrorist was known, the general idea, regardless of minority/majority position, seemed to be that this had to be an act of Muslim terrorists (Aarset, 2018; Vestel and Ali, 2021).

The general reactions during the days following Breivik’s actions, however, were the need for common counterprotest and mourning of the dead, expressed through a series of large demonstrations held in many cities and towns in various parts of Norway. The largest protest assembled outside the town hall in Oslo and included around 200,000 people – still the highest number ever to have participated in a single demonstration in Norway. These demonstrations are referred to as “the rose marches” as the participants often carried roses – which were also a symbol often used by the Labour Party in earlier political campaigns (Witsø Rafoss, 2020). The tone of the emotional ambience in the early days after the terror, was attempted summed up by then prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, in his well remembered words... “Our answer is more democracy, more openness and more humanity. But never naivety”.

Breivik’s acts are largely referred to as an attack against democracy, against the Norwegian state, but also against Norway’s largest political party – the social democrats of the Labour party (“Arbeiderpartiet”) (Børstad et al. (eds.), 2021; Notaker, 2021). Erna Solberg – then leader of the conservative right party (“Høyre”) and later to become prime minister of Norway – made the following comparison in VG, one of the largest Norwegian newspapers, some weeks after the terrorist attack: “The way extreme, anti-Islamic groups speak about Muslims today, resembles the way extreme anti-Semitic groups were speaking about Jews in the decades leading up to the Second World War”.

In two research projects, several years after this incident, this statement was pointed to as important by young radical Muslims, they appreciated that an established politician showed some understanding of their situation, and also drew parallels to the situation for Jews during the Nazi regime (Vestel and Ali, 2021: 62; Vestel, 2016). The importance of the 22 July massacres in Norwegian public is also underlined in the fact that a huge memorial centre has been built – and opened in 2022 – at the seashore where the boat to Utøya has its harbour.

But also what we may term “counter-counter reactions” made the situation more complex. After the attacks, the Labour Party has been repeatedly warned against “drawing the Utøya card” and to play on “being the victim” in political processes. As the then prime minister (now Nato leader, Jens Stoltenberg) at the time prioritized to avoid confrontation – especially with the immigration critics of the Progress Party – to keep the nation together, such avoidance has in recent times been heavily criticized for leading to a situation where the “lessons from Utøya” have not been learnt (Notaker, 2021: 140; Børstad et al. (eds.), 2021: 17-20).

The media: This lack of learning is not least expressed in a 15 pages reportage in the Friday magazine (A-magasinet) – that got coverage in the media all over the country – published by the Aftenposten newspaper in 2018, where a long row of the Labour party’s victims from Utøya, and the wide range of threats – including a large number of death...
threats – that they had received the years after the terror were presented. According to the analyses of Eide, in the media coverage of the terror attacks of July 22nd, two different and contradictive diagnoses could be identified (Eide, 2020: 209). On the one hand, it was asked if the debate on immigration in Norway was so tolerant that the terrorist could believe that his views and even actions were supported by a large number of people. On the other hand, it was proposed that the so called “pressure cooker” model seemed to fit, according to which the criticism against Islam, on the contrary, was so suppressed that it would naturally end up in extreme actions because of the pressure – emotional, political, cognitive – that had been built up. In such a tense situation the freedom of speech discourse has a most central role; has it allowed too much critique, or has it allowed too little “freedom”?

With the acts of terror committed by Breivik, and the high unexpectedness of the event, the Norwegian public was in a state of shock. The yearly reports from Police’s Security Service (PST) had until Breivik’s terror only brought attention to the possibility for terror actions from extremist Islam. For most Norwegians it was especially shocking that the deeds were committed by what writer Åsne Seierstad has termed “one of us”, clearly alluding to the tendency to divide the citizens in to “us” (majority “Norwegians”) and “them”, the citizens of immigrant background (2013). Thus a new dimension was emerging into the landscape of polarisation in Norway, where the discourses of fear and of threats are clearly also valid for extremist right-wing actors, existing and hiding somewhere in the community originally associated as “we, the Norwegians”.

Nevertheless, the strong support, rage and shock expressed by a wide range of Norwegian authorities and also the mainstream majority were clearly expressing a position of deep condemnation of the acts and of solidarity with the victims. Such broad counter-reactions against the extreme (right) must be considered as highly important in the overall political atmosphere in any country, pointing to the third alternative of depolarisation; also here, the hostility of the terror is heavily opposed by its counter-reactions, reflecting the need for the convivial position.

7. 2019. Right wing terror in the mosque: the Manhaus case – Islam as core target in the ongoing/coming race war

In August 2019 Philip Manshaus (21), kills his stepsister of Chinese-Norwegian background, and attempts to kill a congregation of Muslims in a Mosque in the municipality of Bærum, not far from Oslo, as a protest against the multicultural Norway and especially Islam (see Eide, 2020; Alghasi, 2020; Bitsch, 2022). Manshaus was reported to have explained that the killing of his adopted sister was necessary to protect his parents in a future race war where he was convinced that people who had been in contact with “non whites” would be in danger. Manshaus pointed to the New Zealand terrorist, Brenton Tarrant, as one source of inspiration, in addition to Adolf Hitler (!) and Anders Breivik.

In the trial where he was convicted to 21 years in detention prison, the court states that Manshaus’ intention was to create fear among the Muslim citizens, and also – according
to his notebooks – to kill as many as possible in the mosque and then put the building on fire.

With the motivations and political dynamics behind the atrocities of Breivik’s deeds still discussed and reflected upon in the Norwegian public, Manshaus’ case created again an impression that the attitudes, emotions and polarisations that encircled around July 22 2011, still, 8 years after, have not been sufficiently addressed and worked through, as the event so clearly underlines that such attitudes, especially against Muslims and Islam – in the extreme right wing milieus, are still there.

The media: The Manshaus case got much attention in Norwegian media, but the media coverage of the acts has not been much analysed in academic research, except for the relatively short mentioning in Alghasi (2020: 155-156) and Eide and Alghasi (2020).

The terror attempts on August 10th 2019 may be seen as an expression where the anti-Islam attitudes have been taken even a step further, in so far as the action so explicitly was directed against Islam, as the assembly of the congregation in a mosque was the core target. In these ways the discourse of fear and threat – also from the extremist right, as emerging after the of July 22nd 2011 – is further emphasised, and the polarisation further confirmed.

In the direction of the counter-reaction, and underlining the public importance of the event, it was also created “The 10th of August Foundation (Stiftelsen 10 august)”. Here, the aim was to erect a physical building close to the Mosque where the attack was realised, to contain a memorial centre that opened in 2023. The foundation underlines the similarities between the Manshaus’ actions, Breivik’s killings in 2011, and the motivations behind another event of special importance for the multicultural Norway, in the shape of the racist killing of 15-year-old Benjamin Hermansen (Ghanesian-Norwegian background), 20 years earlier, in 2001, in the Holmlia suburb outside Oslo (see Vestel and Ali, 2021; Bitsch, 2021, 2022; Holen, 2018). The foundation is working to develop dialogues, discussions and knowledge about radicalisation and the prevention of such, and is open to the larger public. The aim is thus – as with the July 22 centre – to become a source to remember, to confront, and to counteract the extreme right-wing pole, and thereby to contribute to a process of depolarisation and conviviality.

Some recent transformation toward conviviality: the second generation of Muslim men and women entering the public scene

While in the early years – after the shock emerging from the Nygaard case – the public attention was directed against female suppression in the shape of honour killings, gender violence and the like, mostly represented by victims among young, Muslim women, was also supplemented by a mirror image of the stereotype of “a male Muslim monster” and also a real anti-chauvinism critique (see Vestel and Ali, 2021: 35-40; Wikan, 2001, 2008). But as the analysis has indicated, the attributes and discourses around gender have undergone some important transformations as will be summed up in the following.
When exploring the public debate addressing honour related violence, social control and issues of gender equality we can follow the line from Kadra Yusuf in 2000 to a group of three young Muslim women who named themselves “The Shameless Girls” in newspaper chronicles published in 2016. That year three teenagers with parents from Lebanon and Somalia – Nancy Herz, Amina Bile, Sofia Nesrine Srour – entered the public scene criticizing cultures of honour and social control in various immigrant milieux, at the same time as they refused all support from Islam-hostile milieux or racists (see also Eide, 2020: 172-174). Here, we see again the double perspective; female suppression and patriarchal power are fiercely criticised, while at the same time, female emancipation is clearly demanded, well in line with the gender discourse of the majority, but also, – and not least – in combination with the right to explore new performativities of being Muslim. Such a combination may be understood as pointing toward a depolarising (the third) position, in so far as some agreements are found (the feminist critique of male suppression), but also with the mark of a difference, as the identity of being a Muslim and culturally different is also strongly accentuated. As such they do not refuse the cultural nor marks of the religion, as in the position of extreme universalism, but – on the contrary – they insist on the position of being young Norwegians, Muslims and being feminists, reflecting, again, the possible connection between conviviality and cultural creativity.

Like Kadra Yusuf back in 2000 the “Shameless girls” were met with massive support in the media and the majority society more generally. They got invited to the government building to meet the prime minister, and received several prices for their book “Shameless” published in 2017 (Bile et al., 2017). Here both the old patriarchate – including what they named “rotten imams”, the attempts on social control over young girls, the lack of tolerance regarding alternative sexualities, and the conservatives’ refusal of “secular” living – are clearly condemned.

It has in recent times occurred further examples of young Muslim women who have continued the project of carving out a room for Muslim women to both be able to wear the hijab and express their religiosity in public in ways that challenge the stereotypical images in the majority population (see Eide, 2020: 174). It is thereby indicated that these young Muslim women – through their strong agency, not least as figures in the media – have moved the image of the Muslim woman in Norway, from portraying victims to become role models of strong agency, for other women of similar backgrounds, faith and with feminist/liberal attitudes (see Rosten and Smette, 2021).

This reflects how the image of minority (Muslim) women have changed in fundamental ways since the exotification and victimization of Muslim women in the Norwegian public toward the end of the last century (Gullestad, 2006; Jacobsen, 2011). Since then the media representations of Muslim women are held to have become more complex (Eide, 2020; Figenschou and Beyer, 2014), and this group now occupy a much wider range of positions.

However, for the Muslim women standing in the public spotlight their success often comes with a large cost. All of the women presented as public figures in this article have had their share of hate mail, verbal threats and for some even violent physical attacks from both people within the Norwegian majority as well as from conservative and extremist groups in the minority communities. In line with Aarset (2018: 297) we find
the current Norwegian public arena to reflect “both a **broadened** and a **sharpened**, politicized debate climate, in particular in relation to issues dealing with Islam and Muslims” (our italics); again, we see a movement covering two opposite directions; the critique of the patriarchy and the critique of Islamophobia, at the same time as emphasising the identity as Muslims.

But also another larger transformation has occurred, this time regarding the stereotypes around Muslim males. More precisely: during the years following 2000 – where 9/11 and the long series of terror attacks in different parts of the world obviously had an important part – the public image of the “problematics” of Islam and Muslims in the Norwegian public seems to have shifted towards young men who were engaged in terrorist networks. Around hundred young men and some women, many of them born in Norway of immigrant parents, are reported to have travelled from Norway to Syria to join IS or Al Nusra, and the focus upon the rise and fall of IS was a main issue, also in Norwegian media (see for example Vestel, 2016, 2018, 2020; Vestel and Ali, 2021; Seierstad, 2016; Ofte-Arntsen, 2016). So, in parallel with the liberal and feminist tinged critique – as seen in the examples of young Muslim women described above – at the same time, a darker and definitely more threatening image, here in the “bad boy” image of the Norwegian born and bred male Muslim terrorist, has grown forth, also in Norwegian public, well in line with the discourse of threat (see Vestel and Ali, 2021).

But again the counterimage pointing toward the third position of the triangle has also got several male representatives where more “decent” men of Muslim background have become clearly visible in the overall Norwegian public life (see also Eide and Alghasi, 2020: 44-45). They are all well-known faces in the Norwegian public, not very controversial and all represent the more or less larger mainstream, for whom the multicultural Norway is a natural state that is clearly appreciated but also discussed as having important problematic sides (Rogstad and Vestel, 2012; Vestel, 2016; Holen, 2018). As they all have some variety of immigrant/Muslim background and are salient faces in the overall Norwegian public life – as somehow successful “good guys” – they all contribute to normalise the multicultural situation and everyday life, and thereby become important “living statements” somewhere in the third direction where the polarisation around an “either or”/“us versus them”-image is reduced. Thereby, they are becoming known as prestigious, successful and thus role models for a wide range of young Muslims growing up in the Norwegian context. Not least is their function as agents for “normalising” the state of the multicultural reflected in the fact that their ethnicity and immigrant backgrounds are only very rarely pointed out – in what we may call “a normalising silence” – as relevant in the media (see also Eide and Alghasi, 2020: 45; Retriever, 2017: 27).

A final example of male descendants speaking back against public stereotyping of Muslims and the “Male Muslim Monster” in the Norwegian society is the immensely popular Hip Hop duo “Karpe”, consisting of Magdi (Egyptian and Norwegian parents) who is a Muslim, and Chirag (Indian parents) who is a Hindu (Andersson et al., 2012: 151-164). The two have several times caused public debate with their fierce criticism of the Norwegian society’s lack of will to deal properly with the ideas and world views leading to the right-wing terror caused by Breivik and Manshaus (see Andersson et al., 2012: 151-164; Shanmugaratnam, 2022). Coming from the more privileged and mainly white west side of Oslo, the group nevertheless has a wide appeal among young Norwegians,
across ethnic and religious boundaries. The refrain of their new hit, inspired by the Tunisian folk song, Sidi Mansoor, was topping the list of most played songs in Norway in 2022, and goes “Allah, Allah, ya baba, Wa salam 3layk, ya baba, I know that you believe that I will be great”, repeated over and over again (Shanmugaratnam, 2022). They also, on that new LP, use several words in various “immigrant” languages, without explaining them, as a kind of “commenting back” to many immigrants’ experiences of the lack in majority’s willingness to understand the immigrant position. In August 2022 the duo filled 10 concerts in a row at a grand concert arena in the centre of Oslo, the total number of attendees (110,000) corresponding with more than 2% of the Norwegian population (!), as the group themselves remarked in a television interview. Making majority as well as minority associated Norwegians in large numbers shouting God’s name in Arabic like this – with no reference to Muslim terrorism – could be seen as a victory in itself, from a “convivial” point of view. Again, this is far from an extreme universalism where culture and religion are denied, refused or left behind, but – on the contrary – they become an example where the group insists and realizes the possibility to combine being a Muslim (or a Hindu) with being a Norwegian citizen; without “forgetting where they come from”, so to speak.

Also it goes without saying that the popular rap-duo in this way could provoke both Islam sceptical majority Norwegians, as well as certain groups of conservative and extremist Muslims that might find the whole thing offensive, well in line with this duo’s “second generation” position, again exemplifying the transformative creativity, clearly toward conviviality – the depolarising – pole.

Concluding remarks and some unanswered questions

In the research by Eide and Alghasi we must remind the reader that their study where the four discourses are identified, has been aimed at identifying the main features of ideas, attitudes, tropes and values around Islam and Muslims as they occur primarily in mainstream Norwegian media – and, to some extent, in alternative, radical right-wing media.

A crucial counter question that these media studies have not aimed to illuminate – and that require an exploration in line with QUEST’s planned future research – is therefore: which discourses around Islam, Muslims and their relationships to the non-Muslim world can be identified among the various Norwegian Muslim groups themselves?

We have seen several examples indicating that the mainstream media tend to support and approve primarily the values and attitudes associated to a Western middle class mainstream liberal position, such as feminism, liberal attitudes toward alternative sexualities, secularisation, and strong belief in the freedom of speech, democracy and human rights. And some of the Muslim actors that associate toward these territories have often become what we may term “media darlings”.

Perhaps it is just natural that in a Western liberal democracy like Norway, then the practices of inhabitants with various immigrant backgrounds that develop in the similar direction as the assumed core values of that middle class inclined liberal democracy, are
the ones that are hailed and given the most positive support? This may at least be the case as the liberal middle class in most European countries tend to dominate public life in the hierarchy of power, politically and culturally (see, for example Reckwitz, 2020).

Such developments also reflect the fact that cultural orientations – traditions, attitudes practices – are not static; they move, at times in creative directions, as we have seen. But here one may also ask – in our future research in the QUEST project; how far can one develop new practices adjusted to the new situation in a liberal democracy, and also preserve and nurture a feeling of identity that are not felt as betraying the past and the cultural practices associated with the ethnic groups of their parents and larger families? To provide some answers to that question requires a deeper exploration of how more ordinary Muslim actors experience the tensions between the three attitudinal-political poles we here have sketched out.

And, while these processes develop, we should not forget that the overall situation is also unfolding in the tension with some power related facts that hardly can be denied. Young Muslims – also in social-democrat Norway – may experience breaches on the most elementary human rights: such as racism, islamophobia, discrimination at work, generalized suspicion, overdone police surveillance, and also the terrors of world events including wars and invasions in Muslim dominated areas such as Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Palestine, the horrors of the US prisons and the like, clearly making a convivial relationship more difficult (see, for example, Vestel, 2016; Vestel, 2018; Vestel and Ali, 2021).

The sum of the fears and negativity in the majority appears to have created a strong and polarising pressure upon the identity as Muslims. But also the extreme/radical and even moderate right wingers demanding a “pure” and singularist nationalist identity heavily contributes to these tensions – well in line with Fukyama’s theories about the increasing importance and relevance of identity politics in today’s societies (Fukuyama 2020, 2019; see also Reckwitz, 2020).

However, in 2020, the Norwegian government published “Handlingsplan mot diskriminering av og hat mot Muslimer” (“Action plan against discrimination and hate against Muslims”) (Kulturdepartementet, 2020). Here it is pointed out that:

“ [...] research shows that animosity and negative attitudes against Muslims is a real and increasing problem in Norway. The same is also valid in large parts of the world where it has been an increase in discrimination and attacks on Muslims [...] The Police Security Services’ (PST) threat assessment in recent years shows that it has been an increase in the threat from right wing extremists in Norway. [...] The aim of this action plan is to prevent and to hinder racism and discrimination of Muslims and persons assumed to be Muslims”. (Kulturdepartementet, 2020: 4; translation by the authors)

Even if “action plans” may have very limited impact on practical politics, such a statement from the Norwegian government can, nevertheless, be seen as important in the wider span of developments – even if slow and hard to see in its back-and-forth movements – toward a third position of depolarisation. This development also seems to be confirmed in the recent survey report mentioned in the introduction (Moe (ed.), 2022). But from
that survey the Muslim respondents also report an increase in the number who have experienced that “[...] people give you the feeling of not belonging to the Norwegian society” has increased from 35 percent in 2017 to 43 percent in 2022 (ibid.: 110). Such contradictive findings also reflects that the Norwegian public is a complex landscape and that the press is an arena for much more than presentations of “the problem of Islam” (Døving and Kraft, quoted in Eide, 2020: 177). And even if the focus upon “the problem” is a burden that most Muslim actors have felt as heavy to bear, the possibility for some conviviality – albeit in a modest and moderate form as we have seen in the larger picture emerging from the analyses of these critical events – may reflect at least some hope for a more convivial future in the Norwegian context.

**Afterword**

As this article is being written in March 2024, the Israeli state is fighting a gruesome war, as a response to Hamas’ terror attack on Israeli soil 7th October 2022. 1,400 Israelis versus more than 31,000 Palestinians are reported to have been killed. This disproportion is noticeable, as it also was in the Gaza war in 2008. How these critical events will influence the Norwegian public and the relationship to the country’s Muslim inhabitants remains to be seen.

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² See also Isungset’s comment from 2013: 2012-38_Dodsdommen.pdf (skup.no), downloaded 19.05.2024


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