

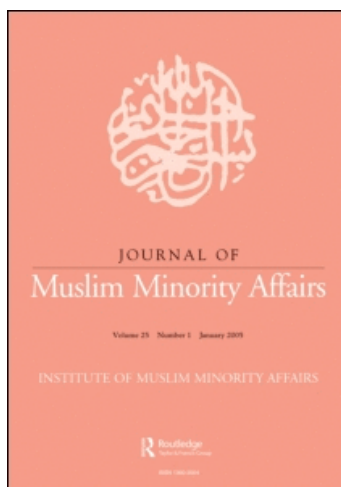
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Arab European League (AEL): The Rapid Rise of a Radical Immigrant Movement

DIRK JACOBS

Abstract

In this paper a contextualized account is given of the rise of the immigrant organization, Arab European League (AEL), in Belgium. An attempt is made to explain how and why the AEL was able to mobilize important numbers of immigrant youngsters in Antwerp, while other actors remained powerless to do so in the past. In addition, the question of why and how the AEL was able to become a key-actor in the debate on immigrant integration in Belgium and in the Netherlands is also addressed. The article discusses the influence of media-coverage on the rise of the AEL and contextualizes the counter mobilization against the AEL and attempts at criminalization of the organization. The focus of this paper is also directed to an analysis of the organization itself, on the level of ideology, discourse and style. In doing so, we look into the significance of the rhetorical use of references to Gamal Abdel Nasser, Malcolm X and the intifada, and into the AEL's fluctuating strategic stress on male and 'Arab pride' identity. Equally, the organization's pan-Arabic and Muslim identity claims, the conceptualization of Arab-Europeanness (inspired by the African-American identity) and multicultural ideology are discussed. The paper finally discusses how the phenomenon of the AEL fits into theoretical approaches to the political mobilization of ethnic minorities, with special attention to insights from the perspective of political opportunity structures.

Introduction

In the Belgian context, non-EU ethnic minority groups were, up till very recently, relatively voiceless in the political arena. The political role of non-EU immigrants was reduced to that of being mere subjects of discourse in domestic politics.¹ This has somewhat changed since the 1999 federal and regional elections, as several politicians of non-EU immigrant origin have become elected in the parliaments. The 2000 local elections equally led to quite a remarkable success of politicians of immigrant origin, particularly in the local councils of the Brussels Capital Region.² The most noteworthy and visible boost to the ethnic minority voice in Belgian politics was, however, not given by the elected politicians of immigrant background, but by the Arab European League (AEL), a controversial and ambitious immigrant organization that had a sudden rise in popularity in Belgium. Almost overnight, the AEL became a key-actor in the debate on immigrant integration in Belgium and even pushed its influence into a neighbouring country, the Netherlands. Ambitions of the AEL do not stop there; with members in allegedly 12 European countries,³ the AEL does not rule out further expansion and has decided that France will be its next target for where to establish an AEL chapter. The AEL discourse, their *modus operandi* and the way in which they manoeuvred themselves into the centre of political debate in Belgium—and increasingly in the Netherlands

as well—seem to be quite exceptional accomplishments for an immigrant organization, and all this calls for analysis.

This paper aims to explain how the AEL was able to rock the Belgian (and Dutch) boat with regards to immigrant incorporation, by leaving the treaded national paths of ethnic minority mobilization. The contextual analysis and interpretation undertaken within this paper is based on primary sources of the AEL itself, secondary sources about the AEL (including a corpus of press articles), active participation in public debates with AEL representatives or sympathizers and informal contacts and interviews with AEL members and sympathizers. I will start with describing how the AEL developed as an organization and how it has been able to become so influential in both Belgium and the Netherlands. This will be followed by a discussion of AEL ideology. Next, I will discuss the radical discourse and confrontational mobilization style of the AEL, which in my opinion are important elements in explaining AEL success. Finally, the political opportunity structures approach of Koopmans and Statham⁴ (POS approach) will be discussed, stressing its relevance to understanding the rise of the AEL, but equally pointing out its shortcomings in doing so.

A Brief History of the AEL

In February 2000 a small group of young Belgians of immigrant (mainly Moroccan and Lebanese) origin create the organization Al Rabita (Arabic for ‘the link’), which has an address in Brussels. The founding text⁵ is written in French. The main goals of Al Rabita are said to be to improve Arab–European relations, to fight racism and prejudice, to promote the interests of the Arab community in Europe and to strive for their emancipation and participation in the economic and political life of Europe. In this first mission statement there is no mention of Islam or Muslim identity.

At the end of 2000, Al Rabita changes its name to Arab European League (AEL), relocates its official address to Antwerp and joins the *Federatie van Marokkaanse Verenigingen* (FMV), an immigrant umbrella organization which is recognized and subsidized by the Flemish government. The AEL cannot therefore be said to be an isolated organization, cut off from the outside world. Apart from the fact that the AEL joins the FMV, there are a number of personal connections between Al Rabita/AEL and other immigrant organizations. An investigation⁶ into the interlocking directorates⁷ of the first Al Rabita and AEL board members shows that there are a number of links at the board level with a diverse number of other ‘immigrant’ (or related) organizations: the Belgian–Lebanese Friendship Association, a Moroccan business association, a humanitarian organization, a quango⁸ involved in immigrant integration and some sociocultural organizations, which are located in a variety of places such as Antwerp, Brussels, Hasselt, Temse and Vilvoorde.

The leader and main spokesperson of the AEL is referred to as Dyab Abou Jahjah. He was born in Lebanon,⁹ arrived in Belgium in 1991 at the age of 19, learned to master both major national languages and has succeeded in obtaining a Belgian degree in political science. Within a relatively short span of time, this man would become a well-known media figure, even drawing attention from far beyond Belgian borders. Most observers agree that he is a charismatic person who understands the art of rhetoric and does not avoid confrontation. At a certain point the *New York Times* will not hesitate to call him the ‘Belgian Malcolm X’.¹⁰

In 2000 and 2001, the Arab European League (AEL) is still a rather marginal immigrant association criticizing Belgian integration policy and claiming involvement in the

Belgian court case against Ariël Sharon.¹¹ At the time Dyab Abou Jahjah's media exposure is limited to participation in intellectual debate in Flemish quality newspapers on immigrant incorporation.¹² Abou Jahjah is one of a number of young immigrant origin intellectuals,¹³ labeled 'Arab panthers' by journalists, who critically discuss immigrant incorporation policy in a series of open letters. Belgian integration policy is rejected as merely giving lip service to the concept of multiculturalism and actually being of an assimilationist—and at times xenophobic—nature. The young intellectuals demand that immigrant organizations should not only be included more but even be given a central role in Flemish and Belgian policy towards immigrant incorporation. They equally stress that cultural diversity should be looked at primarily as a resource and wealth, and not as a problem.

The AEL and its main spokesperson Dyab Abou Jahjah, however, only become known to the larger public in the spring of 2002, following a number of demonstrations related to the Israeli–Palestine conflict. While tensions are returning in the Middle East, the AEL co-organizes a number of well attended pro-Palestine activities. At the end of an illegal demonstration in Antwerp in early April 2002 a number of Moroccan origin youngsters commit a number of violent acts (destroying cars and windows of shops) in the Jewish neighbourhood near the Central Station. Although the AEL distances itself from the hooligans, they equally blame the police, who may have provoked the youngsters, for the incidents. The anti-Jewish incidents attract a lot of media attention and as a result of the riots the Belgian authorities become increasingly suspicious of the AEL. In one press article, which will subsequently be widely referred to by politicians, in the Flemish left wing newspaper *De Morgen*, Dyab Abou Jahjah is portrayed as a 'riot manager'.¹⁴ The Antwerp city government tries to systematically ban all AEL activities, which triggers vehement reactions by the AEL leadership who continue to seek confrontation. Illustrative of these reactions is the following extract from an AEL press release (early June 2002):

Antwerp is the stronghold of Zionism in Europe, and that's why it should become the Mecca of pro-Palestinian action. There isn't a more logical place to demonstrate for Palestine in Europe than a city where the pro-Sharon gangs of Zionist fanatics are dictating the law.¹⁵

Although the AEL concentrates its activities in Antwerp, it equally participates in demonstrations related to international politics, which take place in the Belgian capital, Brussels. In mid-May 2002 an AEL demonstration is held in Brussels in front of several Arab embassies[sic.], 'against the Arab regimes' and 'their cowardliness protesting in dealing with national causes like Palestine', and is allegedly attended by 3000 people. Early in November 2002 an alliance between the AEL and the far left mobilizes over 6000 people to demonstrate against the prospect of a US-led war in Iraq.

Following the first phases of AEL mobilization on the situation in the Middle East, Dyab Abou Jahjah is equally capable of becoming the focus of attention in the debate on immigrant incorporation in the Belgian context. An interview in the summer of 2002 granted to the Flemish quality weekly magazine *Knack* achieved the most impact. In this controversial headline interview, published on 21 August and advertised through a sensational cover, Abou Jahjah warns that the disfavoured situation of immigrant youngsters is a social time bomb. The interview equally includes a number of implicit anti-gay and anti-feminist statements as well as a hint towards the demand of recognition of the Arab language as the fourth official Belgian language,¹⁶ which attracts massive media attention (most of it negative) and leads to a cascade of interviews in

all kinds of media (including all TV channels). Whenever Abou Jahjah is now to appear in public, he will turn up surrounded by bodyguards, which in turn triggers a debate on its own. An increasing number of mainstream politicians criticize the AEL and its numerous immigrant political representatives, and spokespersons of immigrant organizations distance themselves from the AEL. Some criticize the media for giving such a forum to the AEL leader and thus producing a 'star'.

In the autumn of 2002 tensions rise with the local authorities of Antwerp when the AEL establishes a number of civil patrols in order to monitor racist police activity, and distribute posters stating 'Bad cops, AEL is watching you'. The idea of the civil patrols is a direct consequence of a leaked Antwerp police report, 'The Integrated Moroccans' Plan' (*'geïntegreerd plan Marokkanen'*), which the AEL deemed to be racist. In the police plan it is stated that specific monitoring action would be taken to tackle criminal behaviour by youngsters of Moroccan origin. Once again, the AEL's counter-initiative attracts large-scale media attention and triggers political debate about the lawfulness of such civil patrols (and only to a minor extent about the problem of racism among Antwerp police officers). The AEL also starts attracting the attention of foreign, mainly Dutch, media. With regard to the Antwerp context, the AEL press releases further radicalize and the organization is increasingly isolated by the Antwerp, Flemish and Belgian political establishment.

A climax is reached at the end of November 2002 following the murder of a young man of Moroccan origin by an old-aged, autochthonous Belgian.¹⁷ There is an immediate and ongoing rumour—of which the AEL is one of the sources¹⁸—that the murder was a racist act, comparable to a racist murder committed some months earlier in the Brussels municipality of Schaarbeek. In the Schaarbeek tragedy a retired man, known to be a racist and a far-right activist, had shot and killed several members of a neighbouring Moroccan family, allegedly out of disappointment for the defeat of FN leader Le Pen in the French presidential elections. As a direct result of the murder in Antwerp—which brought back memories of the Schaarbeek tragedy—two days of riots break out in Borgerhout, the location where the incident occurred, which is one of the main immigrant (mainly Moroccan) districts of the city of Antwerp. When the AEL leader arrives at the scene of the riots, he calls for calm, according to some sources, and incites the rioting youngsters, according to other sources. Whatever the case, slogans in support of the AEL accompany the urban riots.

With the prospect of elections to be held in a couple of months,¹⁹ several high-ranking politicians, including the Belgian prime minister and the minister of Justice, are tempted to blame the AEL for organizing the violence, and a number of politicians call for outlawing the movement. In Parliament, the prime minister even states that the AEL is merely a criminal organization 'wanting to chase the police from the streets, to be able to continue its criminal activities in certain neighbourhoods', and he announces that immediate steps would be taken. The AEL leader Abou Jahjah is thereupon arrested on shaky grounds in the evening of 28 November 2002, his house and the houses of the other Lebanese AEL founders are searched and he is put into jail, being accused of inciting urban violence with his radical opinions. At that moment the riots stop and the AEL calls for further calm. The next morning the largest Flemish newspaper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, falsely reports that arms had been found in the house of Abou Jahjah.

In the following days, a number of publicists²⁰ and academics²¹ publicly condemn the exaggerated statements by politicians and the accompanying breach of the principle of separation of powers. On 3 December 2002 the courts decide that the AEL leader has to be released due to a lack of incriminating evidence, but imposes the condition that

Abou Jahjah is not allowed to participate in public demonstrations for a period of three months. After the first heated reactions, the political establishment changes strategy and organizes a number of round table conferences with immigrant organizations—most of them without the AEL—and the Flemish government promises it will more actively involve immigrant organizations in its policy development. The following weeks the press, as a result of their own initiative, give a wide—and unprecedented—forum for immigrant intellectuals to express their opinions on immigrant incorporation. In the meanwhile Abou Jahjah has acquired a kind of martyr-status among important sections of the immigrant population and AEL membership numbers are said by the AEL to have rapidly increased from 200 to 2000.

Following the short imprisonment, attempts to strip Abou Jahjah of his Belgian citizenship, which he had acquired through marriage, fail. The judicial investigators are unable to provide proof of the allegation that Abou Jahjah married under false pretexts, only to become a Belgian.²² The fact that he had lied in 1988 during his asylum-seeking procedure equally turns out unfit to be used as a legal ground to strip him of his Belgian citizenship.²³ Moreover, after inquiries into his political activities, the anti-terrorist cell of the federal police has to conclude the investigation by stating he is not being instrumentalized by the Middle East, while a state security report concludes that the AEL is in no way a dormant cell of any terrorist movement.²⁴

At the time of his release from prison on 3 December 2002, Abou Jahjah—once again surrounded by bodyguards—is quick to hold a press conference attended by Belgian and foreign journalists in which he swiftly switches between languages (Dutch, French and English) during his discourse. He announces that he wants to sue the Prime Minister Verhofstadt for libel, for accusing him of organizing criminal activities, and denounce the political interventions leading to his arrest. Abou Jahjah furthermore announces that the AEL would not only aim at participating in the 2006 local elections in Antwerp but would also participate in the 2003 federal elections. This last announcement materializes at the end of February 2003, when the AEL states that it has decided to take part in the May 2003 Belgian federal elections in alliance with the marginal Maoist workers' party (PVDA-PTB) and individual leftist activists. The electoral list is given the name 'RESIST' and uses the slogan 'the voice of resistance' as its baseline. All visible places are taken by the AEL leaders. The decision to participate in the federal elections had already been taken in response to repeated claims by elected immigrant origin politicians that they themselves represented a significant part of the population, which could not be proven by Abou Jahjah.²⁵

The dramatic events of November and December 2002 not only made headlines in Belgium; received worldwide press attention, including coverage in *Time* magazine and on CNN. The riots and the imprisonment of AEL leader Abou Jahjah were very extensively covered by the Dutch press, as if they been a domestic event. This hastened the announcement (in March 2003) that the AEL was planning to set up AEL branches abroad, starting with the Netherlands. Following this announcement, a number of Dutch politicians immediately reacted to the prospect of a potential Dutch wing of AEL. A Christian-democratic MP demanded that the organization be forbidden on Dutch soil, while right-liberal politicians stressed that they considered the AEL to be a dangerous organization that should be monitored. The Dutch Minister of Justice denounced the idea that the AEL would be forbidden in the Netherlands but did announce that the secret service would investigate the preparations of the AEL for founding a branch on Dutch soil. Soon afterwards, an opinion poll by the Dutch weekly, *Contrast*, in January 2003 showed that 25% of the Moroccans in the Netherlands would

vote for the AEL if they participated in the Dutch elections, while 52% would support the creation of a Dutch AEL chapter.²⁶

When Abou Jahjah went to the Netherlands in March 2003 for a number of debates and for preparations for the official launch of AEL-The Netherlands, this was major headline news in Holland. The news-value only increased when the Dutch authorities decided to provide maximum protection²⁷ for Abou Jahjah because of serious threats against him. The Dutch AEL expansion would, in the following months, however, not prove to be a complete success. Relatively soon after the creation of AEL-The Netherlands internal problems would arise.²⁸

Simultaneously AEL-Belgium was more troubled by overt and covert external opposition. Left wing academics and anti-globalist activists, for instance, issued a negative open letter in which voting for RESIST was discouraged. More harmfully, in the popular Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* sources from the Justice department were cited, some weeks before the elections, claiming that there was an investigation into a number of pornographic photos found on the computer of Abou Jahjah, which had been seized at the time of his arrest. A day later, the Justice department, however, officially denied any illegal images had been found.

In the May 2003 national elections RESIST attained 17,604 votes in the Senate (with 8411 preferential votes for Abou Jahjah) and 10,059 votes in the province of Antwerp for the Chamber of representatives (with 5891 preferential votes for Abou Jahjah). The AEL was realistic enough not to expect to gain a seat in parliament (for which it also had to pass the electoral threshold of 5%), but had nevertheless hoped to gain about 30,000 votes in the province of Antwerp.²⁹ AEL admitted that their electoral score was a disappointing—a ‘small defeat’ in their own words but they equally stressed that RESIST had achieved a ‘small victory’ by gaining 6848 votes (or 2.5%) in the city of Antwerp (with 4433 preferential votes for Abou Jahjah), which, in their mathematically incorrect projections, would lead to a seat in the local elections of 2006. They also stated that the results were proof of their claim of being the strongest political movement within the Arab–Islamic community. Soon after the electoral disappointment, in June 2003, Dyab Abou Jahjah announced on a website of immigrant origin intellectuals³⁰ that the AEL would leave RESIST and form its own party with the name of ‘Muslim–Democratic Party’ (*Moslim–Democratische Partij*: MDP).

The marginal electoral success did not rob the AEL of press attention, nor prevent the AEL from continuing its actions. Early in August 2003 the sheer announcement of the AEL founding a French section was news in both Belgium and the Netherlands. In Flanders, France, civil patrols were organized to monitor police behaviour at summer resorts, and at the end of summer it was announced that Muslim pupils’ councils would be installed in Flemish secondary schools. At the start of the new school year, a number of demonstrations were organized against Francophone schools in Brussels which ban the wearing of the headscarf.³¹ In the Netherlands, the AEL equally continued to deliver headline news. Quite some attention was triggered by a controversial interview broadcasted on Dutch television (KRO) on 26 June 2003, in which Abou Jahjah supported the death penalty ‘for very severe criminals’ and hesitated in condemning the mutilation—chopping off the hands—of thieves in Arab countries.³²

AEL Identity and Ideology

As Bousetta and Swyngedouw³³ correctly note, by focusing on issues like racial discrimination, police brutality, problems of political representation, solidarity with the

Palestinian people and the war on Iraq, the AEL has been able to attract the sympathy of a wide range of people from different ideological stances: radical leftists, antiracists, Muslim progressives and radical Islamists, as people without crystallized ideological views who could be seduced by the actions and general discourse of the AEL. At several instances, the AEL leadership has swiftly manoeuvred itself to stress diverse issues which might attract the attention and support of diverse groups of immigrant origin citizens. The unifying element is the stress on the opposition between the excluded and the included, of which the AEL takes the defence of the underdog position of the excluded. Although references to Arab and Muslim identities are discursive elements with clear mobilizing effects in the case of the AEL, Bousetta and Swyngedouw³⁴ stress that it is at the same time to their strategic advantage of the AEL to stick to diffuse identity politics. This is particularly clear with regards to the 'Arab' identity claims. By overstressing an Arab identity, the AEL runs the risk of distancing itself from the Moroccan immigrant community in Belgium (and the Netherlands for that matter), which is mainly of Berber origin, but at the same time constitutes the most important reservoir of AEL followers. The fact that Dyab Abou Jahjah is himself of Lebanese origin only adds to the problems this creates for identity politics. Indeed the AEL has had to employ substantial effort to discursively construct a place for the recognition of Berber language and culture within the logic of an Arab nationalist program.³⁵ It was particularly forced to do so when a new Flemish Berber movement, arguing that Arabs are responsible for domination of the Berber culture, was created in direct reaction to the AEL claims related to the immigrant population. It is furthermore probably no coincidence that in the post-9/11 era, the AEL increasingly stresses its 'Muslim identity', thus equally wanting to appeal to other non-Arab immigrant groups.

Using the same logic, there is no gain for the AEL in having a 'pure' ideological line and thus exclusively defining themselves as Arab nationalists or Islamists. A hybrid position is much more effective in appealing to potential followers, who are mainly guided by the 'hyper local' dissatisfaction with the discriminatory and racist system in which they believe they are caught. In Bousetta and Swyngedouw's view the main demands of AEL followers are not so much of a culturally differentialist kind, but of a civic nature: integration (equal opportunities) and non-discrimination. In this regard, on the ideological level, AEL followers are much closer to African-American protest movements than to Arab nationalists or Islamists in the Arab world, Bousetta and Swyngedouw assert.³⁶

Interestingly, some other elements of the AEL (equally) remind us of the North-American context. The notion of Arab-Europeanness, introduced by the AEL, is a rather unusual type of identity marker in Belgium, or continental Europe for that matter, which has puzzled quite some observers. This kind of 'hyphenated identity' reminds us of composite identities which are quite common in the American setting (i.e., African-American, Arab-American, etc). A look at the original website of the AEL gives us reason to believe that this is not a coincidence.³⁷ Next to photos of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, slogans such as 'we shall overcome' and 'by all means necessary' have been given a prominent place on the website. Just beneath the famous Malcolm X quote, a link is presented to an entire page devoted to this black radical activist. This link to Malcolm X is given the same prominence as a link to the file concerning the case against Sharon and a link to a special webpage dedicated to the Egyptian Arab Nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser. Moreover, in a personal interview, AEL leader Dyab Abou Jahjah confirms being genuinely inspired and influenced by both Malcolm X and Gamal Abdel Nasser and disputes that the links on the website are 'mere' stylish or

symbolic-strategic elements.³⁸ In several interviews, Dyab Abou Jahjah himself compares the struggle of the AEL with the struggle of the Black Panthers.

The AEL has produced a number of texts in which it explains its ideological vision. The above mentioned hyphenated identity of Arab-Europeanness is a central element in AEL discourse. It also reflects the two central tenets of AEL ideology: on the one hand a form of pan-Arab nationalism, and on the other hand a form of multiculturalism. Bousetta and Swyngedouw have correctly argued that AEL leadership has been strategically opting for fostering an open, hybrid ideological line, combining both Arab nationalist, Muslim related and multicultural elements.³⁹ Nevertheless, one can hardly argue that the AEL has a (completely) hidden ideological agenda.

First of all, Dyab Abou Jahjah is very clear in his Arab nationalistic ideas. As an admirer of Nasser, his ultimate goal is one large unified Arab state.⁴⁰ This pan-Arabic state should be democratic and tolerant of non-Muslim inhabitants. It would, however, equally preclude the dismantlement of the Jewish state of Israel.⁴¹ Israel and the US are considered to be the main enemies in the struggle for a unified Arab state, but Dyab Abou Jahjah equally vehemently criticizes the existing Arab regimes—with the exception of Syria—which would only be interested in a *status quo* situation protecting the interests of the current Arab elites.⁴² The pan-Arabic state would be possible due to a new synthesis of Arab nationalism and Islamic identity, which Abou Jahjah believes is rising in the Arab world.⁴³ He claims that the development of the AEL, stressing both that an Arabic and an Islamic identity, can therefore not be denounced as being an artificial (or strategic) choice, but should be looked at as constituting the European reflection of this historical evolution in the Arab world.⁴⁴

Secondly, Dyab Abou Jahjah and the AEL try to uphold a consistent anti-assimilationist discourse within the Belgian, Dutch and European context.⁴⁵ Within the framework of the liberal-democratic state, the AEL pleads for 'truly' a-religious and a-cultural state policies, in the sense that the state does not directly or indirectly favour one particular way of life. In the pamphlet 'The Islamic and National Ideology of the AEL' of June 2003, it is stated that Muslims in the West should abide by the constitution and by the laws of the countries in which they live, they should actively participate both as individuals and as a group in society and they should actively use their constitutional rights to organize themselves to defend the interests of their community and help create room for an Islamic way of life.

In addition, AEL pleads for equal rights for all inhabitants of liberal-democratic states and supports policies aimed at improving the societal position of the most disfavoured groups in order to assure equal opportunities. In line with this view, the AEL calls for programs of corrective affirmative action towards immigrant origin citizens and a strong anti-discriminatory state policy.

Last but not least, the AEL embraces multicultural ideology. In line with multicultural political philosophy, the AEL pleads for recognition of ethnic diversity and for the possibility of group differentiated rights.⁴⁶ Clearly, the accent is on the possibilities this might create for the 'Arab community' in Europe. It is stressed that the Arab language and culture should be fostered in Europe. Within the European context it is stressed that the 'Arab community' should be considered as a 'European minority' (or in the context of European nation-states as a 'national minority'). If we frame this in the terminology of Kymlicka, the AEL insists on the 'Arab community' being entitled to 'multinational rights' (special rights for 'historic' communities) and not merely to 'polyethnic rights' (special rights for immigrant communities).⁴⁷ The AEL stresses that the recognition and strengthening of the culture of origin is a condition for optimal functioning within, and loyalty to, the host societies in Europe. With

regard to Islam, attempts at regulating Islam by European states (the creation of an 'European Islam') are condemned.

AEL Activist Discourse and Mobilization

The AEL has quickly understood the potential of the Internet and has fostered this medium. First of all, there is the AEL website, which has different language versions (English, Dutch, Arabic) and is updated regularly in order to maintain a product which is worthwhile visiting by the outside world. Secondly, the AEL systematically and efficiently uses email for press announcements. Increasingly, the AEL has become capable of sending out press releases concerning the most relevant events regarding the immigrant community in Belgium within hours. Consequently, these press releases tend to be picked up by the press. Thirdly, email (and internet forums) equally function as an important means of communication between AEL members. It is telling that the Internet café *Bismillah* (Arabic for 'In name of God') in Borgerhout (Antwerp) *de facto* has functioned as one of the central hubs for AEL members and AEL supporters. Finally, it might be noted that the use of cellular phones and instant messaging (SMS) also play a role in the quick mobilization of AEL related events.⁴⁸

With pictures of armed and disguised (most likely Palestinian) guerrilla soldiers and numerous references to Malcolm X, the website seems to flirt with violence—or at least the idea of armed resistance. This flirtation with a violent image is a recurring element in the AEL discourse and style. The aggressive tone of most AEL press releases, the bodyguards of Abou Jahjah at public interventions, the civic patrols monitoring the police, a number of veiled threats regarding riots, actual riots taking place in which 'AEL' or the name of Abou Jahjah is being chanted, AEL supporters crying 'Hamas, Jihad, Hezbollah' at demonstrations; all amounts to an aggressive image of the AEL. Although it is often more bluff and show than actual aggressiveness, the AEL has done little to counter the image of being a 'strong', 'radical' and 'aggressive' organization. The reason for this is that this image helps the AEL to secure its street credibility in the most disfavoured areas with immigrant concentrations. The AEL strategic reasoning is that once the most difficult groups of male youngsters of Moroccan origin can be mobilized, it will be much easier to mobilize other groups within the community. One should approach the toughest groups of youngsters of Moroccan origin, taking into account their Muslim and macho identities and their frustrations about (perceived) discrimination, Abou Jahjah claimed. This is exactly what the AEL tries to do when resorting to a somewhat aggressive style. Probably this *modus operandi* is an important element in explaining the success of the AEL in mobilizing those groups of youngsters of Moroccan origin whom other immigrant organizations had lost all hope of reaching. Furthermore, the AEL discourse is at times clearly of a provocative and aggressive nature. Related to domestic matters, the AEL's manifesto states 'You do not receive equal rights, you take them'. In contrast, mainly where international politics are concerned, AEL discourse has a sharp edge. For instance, while condemning the 9/11 attacks, Dyab Abou Jahjah does not hesitate to state that 'America had it coming';⁴⁹ he pinpoints to the Pentagon and the White House as 'legitimate targets'⁵⁰ and defends those Muslims who did not feel sad about the terrorist actions. He equally had no problem in suggesting that adult victims of suicide bombings in Palestine should not be considered innocent,⁵¹ or in stating that he would not mourn for US-soldiers returning in body bags from the war in Iraq.

Appealing to a Muslim identity and stressing Islam in political interventions is yet another element with an important instrumental value. It is striking that references to Islam and Muslim identity have gained an increasing importance in AEL discourse over time. AEL leader Abou Jahjah no longer profiles himself as a secularist,⁵² is said to have stopped drinking alcohol and has stressed that he has resumed the praxis of prayer and Ramadan.⁵³ More importantly, while the organization was at first, when it still had the name 'Al Rabita', outspokenly secularist, the AEL increasingly adopted a Muslim self-identity. In a personal interview Dyab Abou Jahjah denounced my assertion that this was proof of a particular strategy in which Muslim identity is used instrumentally by the AEL leader who as a political entrepreneur has understood the increasing political salience of Islam in the post-9/11 era among immigrant youngsters.⁵⁴ He nevertheless confirmed that it is clear that the fact of being Muslim has gained importance as a political marker within the new international political context. In addition, he stressed that there is not necessarily a contradiction between 'tactics' being used and the message that has to be propagated; although the AEL has particular strategies, this should not be interpreted as mere opportunism since the central message is not being compromised, Abou Jahjah claimed.

Last but not least, AEL is clearly anti-Zionist, to say the least, and also uses this as an important mobilizing factor. The AEL leadership systematically tries to deny that the AEL is also anti-Semitic when it is confronted by repeated anti-Jewish incidents committed by AEL sympathizers. Their rebuttals, in which it is stressed that Arabs are to be considered equally as Semitic as Jews, are, however, not always convincing. It is striking that in the Arab version of the AEL mission statement, the word 'Jews' is struck from a crucial passage:⁵⁵

Our Arab nation has been produced by Islam and it interacted with it through the centuries to construct the Arab-Islamic civilisation. All Arabs belong in some way to that civilisation whether they are Muslims or not. It includes the Arab Christians and Jews, who share its common culture and are accepted as peoples of the book by Muslims.⁵⁶

Explaining the Phenomenon of the AEL

In their research Koopmans and Statham document that the national context in the country of residence is of great importance to the forms of mobilization undertaken by immigrant groups in that country, and even influences transnational demands.⁵⁷ In line with the literature on social movements, Koopmans and Statham empirically illustrate that 'political opportunity structures' influence patterns of political mobilization by immigrant ethnic minority groups. Their findings falsify hypotheses claiming that an emerging new form of post-national membership has rendered the national context largely irrelevant and that migrants increasingly claim multicultural group rights in all Western nation-states.⁵⁸

Koopmans and Statham find that immigrant political mobilization is, in contrast, highly 'coloured' by the discourses and institutions prevalent in the host countries. Their theory states that it is to be expected that migrants are more inclined to make claims regarding their situation in the country of settlement, where the state provides opportunities for them and their organizations to do so. Koopman and Statham equally assert that the migrants will make these claims in ways which are largely consistent with dominant views on immigrant integration and citizenship, within the specific

national context. In addition to opportunities and constraints set by national citizenship regimes and integration models, Koopmans and Statham stress the influence of the sending-country's (countries of origin of immigrants) policies, with regards to its emigrants, on types of the claims made by the migrants. They predict an influence of sending-countries' policies to either stimulate assimilation of their (former) subjects into the host society, or to wish for emigrants to retain their allegiance—or an intermediate policy stance—on types of migrant claims-making. As a third factor influencing types of migrant claim-making, Koopmans and Statham pinpoint the importance of collective identities by migrant groups themselves. The latter is, however, to a great extent seen as being influenced by both the receiving state's regime—which is seen to be the most important factor—as by homeland influences. By promoting some migrant identities over others—stress on potential identity markers such as national origin, ethnic background, religion or on new categorizations like 'immigrant' or 'ethnic minority'—receiving states can influence the genesis or alteration of migrants' identities.

Koopmans and Statham empirically investigated the public claims-making of immigrants by examining data drawn from content analyses of daily newspapers in a number of countries. They are honest to admit that there is a potential bias linked to the use of this kind of data:

... when using newspapers as a source one has to deal with the problem of selection—not all events that occur receive coverage—and description bias—events may get covered in a distorted way.⁵⁹

Given this caveat, the results are striking. National citizenship and integration regimes are of significant importance in shaping collective identities of migrant communities and influencing the types of immigrant political mobilization. Migrants to a large extent adopt the collective identities stimulated by the societies of their states of settlement (for instance: racial and religious identities in Great Britain, ethnic identities in the Netherlands and national identities in Germany), and their claims generally fit into the logic of integration provided by the nation-state.

Within the Belgian federal context the Flemish and Francophone communities develop their own policies concerning immigrants or ethnic minority groups.⁶⁰ On the Flemish side, there is official recognition of the existence of ethnic-cultural minority groups; the incorporation model focuses on group emancipation, and immigrant self-organization is endorsed. On the Francophone side, on the contrary, an individualist and assimilationist policy model prevails and institutionalization of ethnic diversity is discouraged. The pattern of development of the Arab European League (AEL) within the Belgian context is partly consistent with possible predictions which flow from Koopmans and Statham's theory. It is in line with expectations within the framework of Koopmans and Statham that the AEL, as an immigrant organization, is most active and viable within the Flemish context on the one hand, and has had, on the other hand, quite some difficulty in gaining ground on the Francophone side in Belgium. It could equally be expected that the AEL would find fertile ground on Flemish soil as an immigrant organization stressing an ethnic identity. In the same line of reasoning, it should not be so surprising that the AEL was soon transplanted in a successful manner to the Netherlands, which equally endorses ethno-cultural identity as a basis for mobilization and emancipation.⁶¹ It is, however, a lot less in line with the Koopmans and Statham perspective, that the main identity marker, Arab-Europeanness, is an unknown categorization within the political opportunity structures of both Flanders and the Netherlands. Although the creation of the AEL itself is of course dependent on contingent factors (i.e., for instance the

fact that its charismatic leader immigrated to Belgium), it is equally surprising that this kind of successful 'radical' immigrant organization, stressing ethnic identity, did not come into existence in more 'favourable' environments, such as the UK, Sweden or the Netherlands,⁶² but in a more hostile environment such as Antwerp (Flanders). It is furthermore noteworthy that the AEL is now planning to 'conquer' France, which would constitute a strategic blunder—or at least a huge challenge—when looked at from the point of view of Koopmans and Statham.

In Antwerp—as in the rest of Belgium—the non-EU immigrant origin population, and especially those of Moroccan origin (with 20,768 non-nationals it is the largest non-EU immigrant group, accounting for 4.6% of the population in 1999), are in a structurally disadvantaged position.⁶³ The success of the extreme-right wing racist party Vlaams Blok, attaining 33% of the votes in the 2000 local elections, constitutes one of the signs that this population resides in a rather hostile anti-immigrant environment. As Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw note, Moroccans in Antwerp have traditionally tried to advance the interests of their community through four channels: political participation within mainstream or radical political parties, participation in advisory councils, participation in civil society organizations and trade unions and through 'infra-political' forms of mobilization within informal networks.⁶⁴ Large immigrant organizations dominated by Moroccans, such as FMDO, VOEM and FMV have a considerable track record within the Antwerp context, and are recognized as official immigrant federations by the Flemish government. They have traditionally opted to voice immigrant interests at the negotiating table(s). At odds with the practices of other immigrant organizations in Antwerp (and Flanders and Belgium at large), newcomer AEL has soon chosen to manifest itself through the street.⁶⁵

Bousetta and Swyngedouw argue that looked at from a purely strategic point of view, regardless of the moral judgements one might have, the confrontational style of the AEL cannot be easily dismissed as being a tactical error within the Belgian context.⁶⁶ Following the uncoordinated street riots of 1991, 1993 and 1997 involving immigrant youngsters in Brussels, regional and federal politicians have taken the important steps of massively investing in projects in the most disfavoured neighbourhoods, with high concentrations of immigrants, throughout the country. The riots have in the past proved an important incentive to advance all sorts of initiatives aimed at immigrant incorporation. Considered from a historical point of view, political confrontations on the streets are, moreover, hardly an exceptional strategy for groups who feel they are being dominated or disfavoured.⁶⁷

This is, however, in the case of the AEL's rise over the last couple of years, not a pattern to be expected from the point of view of the POS-approach, according to which immigrants are pushed to undertake forms of collective action which are endorsed by and compatible to the logic of the immigrant incorporation regime provided by the receiving state. A strategy of confrontation is most likely in a situation in which other options of claims-making are structurally blocked. This is clearly less the case in Belgium in 2003 than it was 10 years earlier. At the start of the new millennium, with one of the most liberal nationality legislations in the world, a decade of efforts to implement an integration policy, new anti-discrimination laws, active support (from the Flemish side) for immigrant organizations and electoral competition between mainstream political parties for the immigrant vote, have made the political opportunity structures for immigrant claims-making in Belgium probably more favourable than they have ever been before.

Apparently, objective opportunities provided by the state for immigrant claims-making are not necessarily the determining factor for the success of particular forms of

mobilization. There is still ample room for deviant forms of immigrant mobilization when smart discursive strategies lead to alternative social constructions of reality. The strength of the AEL and the appeal of its 'strategy of the street' has not been determined by the objective lack of formal possibilities for mainstream political participation, either through elections or advisory councils. I would rather argue that the success of the AEL has been mainly the product of its rhetorical efforts to convince concerned immigrant groups that mainstream mobilization is no (longer a) sensible strategy in spite of formal possibilities. Typically, the AEL has systematically questioned the credibility of classic political venues and has, in particular, put substantial energy into denouncing politicians of immigrant origin as not being genuine and effective representatives. Dyab Abou Jahjah has, indeed, consistently blamed and named immigrant origin politicians, especially when based in Antwerp, as being powerless token representatives. In order to try and destroy legitimacy of mainstream political involvement, the AEL has, for instance, compared immigrant spokespersons to '*évolués*' ('the evolved'), the official terminology used in the 1950s to designate black citizens, which were educated and coopted by the Belgian colonialists in the Congo but officially remained second class citizens.⁶⁸

Boussetta and Swyngedouw correctly pinpoint a number of factors behind why the Antwerp context proved to be fertile ground for the AEL discourse and its deviant forms of immigrant contestation.⁶⁹ Immigrant groups have in Antwerp—although it is clearly not a factor limited to this city—largely remained structurally disfavoured in the labour and housing market and over time, problems have increased rather than decreased.⁷⁰ It is, hence, understandable that a part of the (Antwerp) immigrant youngsters are no longer willing to opt for docile reactions which have characterized their older community members. Although a similar structural context is to be found in other parts of Belgium (and in the Netherlands), discontentment is further fuelled by the tense political situation of Antwerp. It should be stressed that the city has known a rapid electoral growth of the extreme right wing and racist party, Vlaams Blok, since 1988 (now it is the largest party in the city). Since 1994 all other parties began to cooperate in one anti-Vlaams Blok monster coalition, containing all democratic ideological perspectives and limiting their room for action. The inability to stop the electoral advance of the extreme right has pushed the right wing sections of the mainstream parties to put more stress on law and order, and has cast doubts on the effectiveness of (the relatively new) efforts in support of a politics of integration. Given this situation, the immigrant origin politicians were unable to show substantial results, which led to the sentiment among sections of the immigrant population that they were not really being represented or were being represented in an ill fashion. For similar reasons, immigrant organizations cooperating with the political level in all kinds of advisory councils and integration policy programs, have limited room for manoeuvre. Not surprisingly, the success of the Vlaams Blok stimulated negative feelings among the immigrant population towards their Belgian 'hosts'.

In other words, 'political opportunity structures', which 'define the availability and relative attractiveness of different options for collective action that challenger groups face', not only have to give theoretical room for immigrant voice on paper, they equally have to function in reality in leading to the influence of, and generating political power for, immigrant actors.⁷¹ This explains why the AEL has had most success in gaining ground in Antwerp, in which immigrant origin politicians were unable to achieve pivotal political positions in local policymaking. In Brussels, a city-region with a much higher demographical strength of the immigrant (and mainly Moroccan) community, there has recently been a very successful election rate—partly due to ethnic

block voting within a system of preferential voting—of Belgians of Moroccan origin in the local elections.⁷² Although large parts of the immigrant population are equally ‘trapped’ in disfavoured neighbourhoods of Brussels as they are in Antwerp, immigrant origin politicians have recently been able to gain considerable political influence, and the immigrant population increasingly constitutes a considerable electoral force in Brussels and Antwerp. Classical venues of political participation at least hold the promise of improvement for immigrant groups, potentially triggered through their access to power of immigrant origin political leaders. Such a sentiment is, for the moment, lacking in the Antwerp context. It is therefore less surprising that the AEL was (and up to date still is) unable to gain firm ground within the Brussels capital region.

The above mentioned factors have contributed to the appeal of the anti-establishment discourse used by the AEL among a considerable part of the Antwerp youngsters of immigrant origin, and they partly explain why they allow the AEL leaders to act as their spokespersons. Once it became evident that the AEL confrontational style was very effective in attracting media attention and political agenda setting, the confrontation strategy thereupon became exportable to the rest of Flanders, to Brussels and to the Netherlands. The confrontational style and anti-establishment discourse were imported, although venues to political power are *de facto* less accessible, and interethnic relations are more tense in Antwerp.

Interestingly, the AEL was not only able to mobilize on domestic issues, but was equally successful in staging actions related to international politics. The AEL was able to attract considerable numbers of people to participate in demonstrations and rallies concerning Palestine and Iraq, which it organized or co-organized with far-leftist organizations. Within the logic of the AEL this would be labeled as self-evident forms of trans-national mobilization⁷³ related to the ‘Arab nation’, but looked at from an outsiders perspective in a strict sense, this is hardly the case. Indeed, most youngsters involved in the demonstrations are of Moroccan descent and have no genuine links with either Palestine (or Lebanon) or Iraq. Nevertheless, the AEL somehow succeeded in mobilizing the Antwerp Belgo-Moroccan youngsters around these topics, making use of Arab and Muslim identity markers and framing them within a discourse of a legitimate and self-evident struggle against injustice towards their ‘own’ community. In doing so, actions related to domestic affairs on the one hand, and rallies concerning Middle East politics on the other hand, were smartly presented as being two sides of the same coin. Once again, this is partly at odds with the predictions of the POS-approach, in which it is assessed that trans-national claims-making is most prevalent in receiving states, which offer little opportunity to migrants to influence the policy process, and symbolically exclude them from the national community.⁷⁴

The Debate

Although Belgian and Dutch politicians and journalists have in the post-9/11 era been tempted to label the Arab European League (AEL) as a radical-Muslim or Islamist organization, there are not sufficient elements to justify such a view. References to Muslim identity clearly have mobilizing importance for the AEL and the organization has at times tried to take up the role of defenders of Islam. For the AEL leadership, Arab nationalism, however, has at least as much ideological importance as Islam has—and one might even argue that the former is considered to be instrumental for the latter. Nevertheless, neither Arab nor Muslim identity markers constitute the exclusive backbone of AEL success among its adherents. The bulk of its followers are mainly

attracted by its firm stress on the opposition between the excluded and the included, of which AEL defends the underdog position of the excluded population of immigrant (Muslim) background. As such, the AEL is *de facto* less of a transnational Arab nationalist movement or a radical Muslim organization, than it is a local radical immigrant organization stressing equal opportunities. This being said, AEL leadership at the same time adheres to quite an ambitious ideological line for the Arab world, stressing the merger between Arab nationalism and Islamism. Considering that the AEL is still a small organization in modest European countries, one might even label the Arab–Islamic ideological line as being megalomaniac.

The AEL is a ‘radical’ immigrant organization to the extent that mobilization on the street and the use of confrontational discourse constitute two of its main strategies, at odds with the praxis of most other and earlier immigrant organizations. Whatever moral opinion one might have about this *modus operandi*, this turns out to have been a smart strategic move since it did have a tremendous effect in promoting the AEL to the level of one of the key-actors in the Belgian (and Dutch) debate on immigrant incorporation. Paradoxically, by overreacting to the AEL and engaging in direct confrontation, the Belgian political establishment has highly contributed to the success of the AEL. The media have equally played an important role in establishing AEL leader Dyab Abou Jahjah as a credible spokesperson for a part of the immigrant community by giving him a broad and continuous forum. The confrontational AEL strategy might have been productive in making a radical immigrant voice clearly audible in the public debate, whether this ability is a good thing for immigrant emancipation and for the peaceful coexistence of different groups is another matter. Although the AEL cannot be blamed to be responsible for the growth of the extreme right wing party Vlaams Blok till now, its confrontational style might be one more element clearing the path for the racist Vlaams Blok to take over political power in Antwerp, Flanders largest city, in the 2006 local elections.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to give a contextualized account of the rise of the Arab European League (AEL). I have stressed the significance of the confrontational discourse and mobilization style of the AEL. To an important extent, the vehement reactions of the political establishment—to be understood in the light of competition with a strong anti-immigrant far-right party in Antwerp—and the fascination of the media for the atypical *modus operandi* of the AEL and its charismatic leader, have been responsible for the rapid growth of the radical immigrant movement and its impact on the Belgian debate over immigrant incorporation. Extensive media coverage and blunt attempts at the criminalization of the organization have made an elephant out of what was once a mouse. By opting for direct confrontation on the street level, clear multicultural demands and fluctuating strategic stress on ‘Arab pride’ and Muslim identity, the AEL has been able to gain the sympathy of important groups of immigrant youngsters. In the meanwhile, the press has been both puzzled and fascinated by the group’s pan-Arabic and Muslim identity claims, its conceptualization of Arab–Europeanness (inspired by the African–American identity), its aggressive style and discourse, its ability to mobilize immigrant youngsters for international political issues and its radical confrontational strategy with regard to issues of exclusion. The political establishment, on their part, was ‘tricked’ into making the AEL one of its main sparring partners in the debate on immigrant incorporation, thus granting the AEL increased legitimacy.

The political opportunity structures approach (in short: POS-approach) of Koopmans and Statham provides an important theoretical framework to try and explain forms of political mobilization—outside the electoral venue—by ethnic minorities. In this paper, I have argued that the POS-approach can indeed also help us to shed light on a phenomenon such as the rise of the radical immigrant movement, Arab European League (AEL). It is, however, noted that the POS-approach does a better job in explaining mainstream types of immigrant mobilization than in framing successful forms of atypical anti-establishment mobilization by ethnic minorities. The deviant case of the AEL illustrates that a confrontational mobilization style, distancing itself from the dominant regime, can be equally viable as—and even more successful than—more docile forms of political mobilization, fitting within the dominant political praxis.

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NOTES

1. Dirk Jacobs, “The debate over enfranchisement of foreign residents in Belgium”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2001, pp. 649–663.
2. Dirk Jacobs, Marco Martiniello and Andrea Rea, “Changing Patterns of Political Participation of Citizens of Immigrant Origin in the Brussels Capital Region: The October 2000 Elections”, *Journal of International Migration and Integration/Revue de l'intégration et de la Migration Internationale*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2002, pp. 201–221.
3. See online: <<http://www.arabeuropean.org/documents/lettertothemembers.html>>.
4. See Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, “Challenging the Liberal Nation State? Postnationalism, Multiculturalism, and the Collective Claims-Making of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities in Britain and Germany”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, 1999, pp. 652–696; Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, “How National Citizenship Shapes Transnationalism: Migrant And Minority Claims-Making In Germany, Great Britain And The Netherlands”, in *Toward Assimilation And Citizenship. Immigrants In Liberal Nation-States*, eds., Christian Joppke and Eva Morawska, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 195–238.
5. *Belgisch Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge*, Associations sans but lucrative—Verenigingen zonder winstoogmerk, (Belgian Monitor. Associations without lucrative aims) 30 January 2001, pp. 708–710.
6. Systematic search (name recognition) performed in *Belgisch Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge*, Associations sans but lucrative—Verenigingen zonder winstoogmerk (period 1998–2003).
7. See, for innovative research on interlocking directorates of immigrant associations, Meindert Fennema and Jean Tillie, “Political participation and political trust in Amsterdam. Civic communities and ethnic networks”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 703–726; and Meindert Fennema and Jean Tillie, “Civic community, political participation and political trust of ethnic groups”, *Connections*, Vol. 24, 2001, pp. 26–43.
8. “Quango” stands for quasi-non-governmental organization. These non-governmental organizations are subsidized by the government in order to implement a number of policy objectives.
9. Dyab Abou Jahjah was born on 24 June 1971 in a Lebanese village on the border of Palestine occupied territory, a few years before the start of the Lebanese civil war. His mother is Christian, his father is Muslim. See Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah, L'erreur*, (Abou Jahjah, the mistake), Bruxelles: Editions Luc Pire, 2003, pp. 11–13.

10. M. Simons, "Belgium's Malcolm X: Immigrant Activist sets out to 'Rock the Boat'", *The New York Times*, 5 March 2003.
11. AEL itself claims they took the main initiative for the court case for crimes against humanity, made possible by the (late) Belgian genocide-law, and played a decisive role in it. This is disputed by other people involved through the organization CODIP in the *Sabra and Shatila*-claim (see online: <<http://www.indictsharon.net>>), who stress AEL was indeed involved at an early stage, but had a rather disruptive role in the court-case preparations. See Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–34.
12. Bob Van den Broeck and Marie-Claire Foblets, *Het failliet van de integratie? Het multiculturalismedebat in Vlaanderen*, (The failure of integration? The debate on multiculturalism in Flanders), Leuven: Acco, 2002.
13. Other important critical voices include Tarik Fraihi, later to become advisor of the social-democratic party and Mohamed Talhaoui, later to briefly become advisor of the liberal prime minister of Flanders.
14. Anne De Graaf, "De rellenmanager", (The riot manager), *De Morgen*, 20 April 2002.
15. AEL press release, "A Call for Demonstration this Saturday at 14h00 in Antwerpen", 5 June 2002. The press release is published in Dutch and in English.
16. A statement he later revoked, stressing the journalists had exaggerated his argumentation on national minority rights.
17. Mr Mohammed Achrak (27), a school teacher of Moroccan origin, is shot to death on his doorstep by an older aged (66) autochthonous Belgian neighbour on 26 November 2002. At the time of the shooting it is unclear whether the murder had a racist motive or not. It would later turn out that the murderer had mental problems.
18. On 27 November 2002 the AEL states in a press release that it was clearly a racist murder and that the police had failed to respond to earlier complaints of the victim. The AEL adds they further hold the city government accountable since they would have indirectly contributed to a racist climate, believed to have led to the murder, due to their policy of 'criminalisation of Muslims'. See AEL press-release, "Slachtoffer diende twee maal klacht in bij de politie", (Victim filed complaint twice), 27 November 2002.
19. It should be noted that Belgian politics is strongly influenced by the ongoing electoral success of the extreme right wing party *Vlaams Blok*, currently standing at 24% of the Flemish electorate (the main national group in Belgium) and 35% of the electorate in Antwerp, Flanders largest city. After being sentenced for racism by a Belgian court in 2004, the party changed its name to *Vlaams Belang*.
20. L. De Witte, T. Fraihi and T. Lanoye, "De jacht op Abou Jahjah is open", (The hunt for Abou Jahjah has been declared open), *De Standaard*, 28 November 2000.
21. N. Fadil, D. Jacobs, A. Marx, H. De Ley, J. Blommaert, M. Kanmaz, *et al.*, "Open brief aan alle beleidsverantwoordelijken", (Open letter to all policy makers), *De Morgen*, 3 December 2002. Open letter to policymakers, signed by 207 academics.
22. Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 13–16.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
25. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist! Veel meer dan een cultuurschok*, (Resist! Much more than a culture shock), Berchem: EPO, 2003, p. 47.
26. Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
27. Including police bodyguards, bulletproof vests, an armoured car and helicopter assistance.
28. A number of interesting emails by ex-AEL members, shedding some light on the internal conflicts, have been posted in a forum (threadid = 66295) at the website: <www.maroc.nl>.
29. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
30. See online: <www.kif-kif.be>.
31. In most Francophone schools the wearing of the headscarf is forbidden. See Mina Bouselmati, *Le voile contre l'intégrisme. Le foulard dans les écoles*, (The headscarf against fundamentalism. The headscarf in the schools), Bruxelles: Labor, 2002. In most Flemish schools it is not.
32. It should probably be mentioned that Abou Jahjah was rather reluctant to answer these questions but was eagerly solicited by the interviewing TV journalist.
33. Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swynedouw, "Anvers face à la contestation de sa jeunesse allochtone", (Antwerp and the contestation of its allochthonous youth), *L'Année Sociale* 2003, Vol. 43, 2004, pp. 83–94.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

36. Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw, "Anvers face à la contestation", *op. cit.*
37. See online: <<http://www.arabeuropean.org>> The website has, however, been restyled in 2005.
38. Informal personal interview on 25 February 2002 with AEL leader Dyab Abou Jahjah in his home in Antwerp.
39. Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw, "Anvers face à la contestation", *op. cit.*
40. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, p. 18; and Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
41. Wim De Neuter "Waar zitten de echte antizionisten?: Dyab Abou Jahjah", *Uitpers*, Vol. 4, No. 41, 2003, pp.
42. Linda Fokkema and Martin Siepermann, "Interview met Dyab Abou Jahjah: Saddam is peanuts vergeleken met Amerika", *Soera*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2003, pp. 4–9.
43. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, p. 25; and Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
44. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–26.
45. Dyab Abou Jahjah, "Assimilation or deportation: Arabs in Europe and Their Struggle for Civil Rights", paper presented at a symposium about terrorism and human rights organized by the CIHRS in Cairo, January 2002. See online: <<http://www.arabeuropean.org/documents/ArabsinEurope.html>>.
46. Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
47. *Ibid.*
48. Illustrative is the account given in the online article "Dyab Abou Jahjah (AEL) opgemerkt in Gent" (Dyab Abou Jahjah (AEL) seen in Ghent), by an AEL sympathiser, on the importance of SMS in mobilizing an audience for a speech by the AEL leader. See online: <<http://www.arabeuropean.org/nederlands/lezinggent212002.html>>.
49. See online <<http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2002/603/sc121.htm>>.
50. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
52. Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
53. Dyab Abou Jahjah and Zohra Othman, *Resist*, *op. cit.*
54. Informal personal interview on 25 February 2002 with AEL leader Dyab Abou Jahjah in his home in Antwerp.
55. Maroun Labaki, *Abou Jahjah*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
56. The English version of the mission statement of AEL is available online at: <<http://www.arabeuropean.org/aboutus.html>>.
57. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "Challenging the Liberal Nation State?", *op. cit.*; and Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "How National Citizenship Shapes Transnationalism", *op. cit.*
58. Yasemin Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship. Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*, London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
59. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "How National Citizenship Shapes Transnationalism", *op. cit.*, p. 216.
60. Dirk Jacobs, "Immigrants in a Multinational Political Sphere: The Case of Brussels", in *Multicultural Policies and Modes of Citizenship in European Cities*, eds., Alisdair Rogers and Jean Tillie, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001, pp. 107–122.
61. It should be noted that the endorsement of ethnic identity as a basis for mobilization has been increasingly questioned—since populist politician Pim Fortuyn started criticizing multicultural policy—over the last couple of years.
62. At least in the period before Pim Fortuyn (and the political party LPF defending his views after he was murdered) came to the political stage, the Netherlands could still be considered to be a more favourable climate.
63. Obviously, the number of people of Moroccan origin is higher. There are, however, no official figures available in Belgium taking account of ethnic identity.
64. Hassan Bousetta, "Immigration, Post-Immigration Politics and the Political Mobilisation of Ethnic Minorities. A Comparative Case-Study of Moroccans in Four European Cities" (Utrecht, Liege, Antwerp and Lille), unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, 2001.
65. Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw, "Anvers face à la contestation", *op. cit.*
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*; and Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *The Breaking of the American Social Compact*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.
69. Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw, "Anvers face à la contestation", *op. cit.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. Hassan Bousetta, "Immigration, Post-immigration Politics and the Political Mobilisation of Ethnic Minorities", *op. cit.*
72. Dirk Jacobs, Marco Martiniello and Andrea Rea, "Changing Patterns", *op. cit.*
73. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton-Banc, *Nations Unbound: Transnationalized Projects and the Deterritorialized Nation-State*, New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994, p. 6. Basch *et al.* define transnationalism as consisting of 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographical, cultural and political borders. An essential element is the multiplicity of involvement that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies'.
74. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "How National Citizenship Shapes Transnationalism", *op. cit.*, p. 207.