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**The Arab European League.
The rapid growth of a radical immigrant movement.**

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In this paper a contextualized account will be given of the rise of the Arab European League (AEL), focussing on the Belgian case. An attempt is made to explain how and why the AEL was able to mobilize important numbers of foreign origin youngsters in Antwerp while other actors had remained powerless to do so in the past. In addition, the question will be addressed why and how the AEL was able to become a key-actor in the debate on immigrant integration in both Belgium as the Netherlands. This exercise will entail an analysis of the organization on the level of style, discourse and ideology and the reactions these have triggered in politics and media. Finally, it will be discussed to what extent the phenomenon of the AEL fits into one of the main contemporary theoretical approaches of political mobilization of ethnic minorities, the so-called political opportunity structures-perspective.

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 (Jacobs, 1999). 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 immigrant origin politicians, particularly in the local councils of the Brussels Capital Region (Jacobs, Martiniello, Rea, 2002). The most remarkable and visible boost to ethnic minority voice in Belgian politics was, however, not given by the elected politicians of immigrant background, but by the sudden rise of a controversial and ambitious immigrant organization, called the *Arab European League* (AEL). Almost overnight, the AEL became a key-actor in the debate on immigrant integration in Belgium and even pushed its influence into neighbouring country The Netherlands. Ambitions of the AEL do not stop there; with members in allegedly twelve European countries¹, AEL does not rule out further expansion and has decided France will be its next target for establishing an AEL-chapter. The AEL-discourse, their *modus operandi* and the way in which they manoeuvred themselves to the centre of political debate in

¹ [<http://www.arabeuropean.org/documents/lettertothemembers.html>]

Belgium - and increasingly in the Netherlands as well – seem to be quite exceptional for an immigrant organization and call for analysis.

This paper aims to explain how the AEL was able to rock the Belgian (and Dutch) boat with regard to immigrant incorporation by leaving the threaded national paths of ethnic minority mobilization. I will start with sketching how the AEL developed as an organization and 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 the AEL-success. Finally, the political opportunity structures approach of Koopmans and Statham (1999, 2003) will be discussed, stressing its relevance for understanding the rise of the AEL, but equally pointing to its shortcomings to do so.

A brief history of 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'), with an address in Brussels. The founding text² is written in French. The main goals of *Al Rabita* are said to be to improve Arab-European relations, 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 recognised and subsidised by the Flemish government. The AEL cannot 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 investigation³ into interlocking directorates⁴ of the first *Al Rabita* and AEL board members, shows there are a number of links on 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 quango⁵ involved in immigrant integration and some socio-cultural organizations, which are located in a variety of places as Antwerp, Brussels, Hasselt, Temse and Vilvoorde.

² *Belgisch Staatsblad / Moniteur Belge*, Associations sans but lucrative – Verenigingen zonder winstoogmerk, 30/1/2001, p. 708-710.

³ Systematic search (name recognition) performed in *Belgisch Staatsblad / Moniteur Belge*, Associations sans but lucrative – Verenigingen zonder winstoogmerk (period 1998-2003).

⁴ See for innovative research on interlocking directorates of immigrant associations: Fennema and Tillie (1999; 2001).

⁵ '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.

The leader and main spokesperson of AEL is called Dyab Abou Jahjah. The man was born in Lebanon⁶, 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 far beyond Belgian borders. Most observers agree 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'⁷.

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 Sharon⁸. At the time Dyab Abou Jahjah's media exposure is limited to participation to intellectual debate in Flemish quality newspapers on immigrant incorporation (Van den Broeck & Foblets, 2002). Abou Jahjah is one of a number of young immigrant origin intellectuals⁹, labelled '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 immigrant organizations would not only be included more but even be given a central role in Flemish and Belgian policy towards immigrant incorporation. They equally stress cultural diversity should be looked at primarily as a resource and wealth, not as a problem.

The AEL and its main spokesperson Dyab Abou Jahjah, however, only get 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 early April 2002 in Antwerp, 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 would 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 AEL becomes increasingly distrusted by the Belgian authorities. In one press-article, which will be widely referred to by politicians, in the Flemish left-wing newspaper *De Morgen* Dyab Abou Jahjah is portrayed as a 'riot manager'¹⁰. The Antwerp city government tries to systematically ban all AEL-activities, which triggers vehement reactions by the AEL-leadership who

⁶ 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 (Labaki, 2003: 11-13).

⁷ Simons, M. (2003) 'Belgium's Malcolm X: immigrant activist sets out to 'rock the boat'', *The New York Times*, 5 March 2003.

⁸ 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 <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 (Labaki, 2003: 25-34).

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Anne De Graaf, 'De rellenmanager', *De Morgen*, 20 April 2002.

continue to seek confrontation. Illustrative 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”¹¹.

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. Mid may 2002 an AEL-manifestation was held in Brussels in front of several Arab embassies ‘against the Arab regimes’ and ‘their cowardness in dealing with national causes like Palestine’, allegedly attended by 3000 people. Early November 2002 an alliance between 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 able to become the focus of attention in the debate on immigrant incorporation in the Belgian context. Most impact is resorted by an interview in the summer of 2002, granted to the Flemish quality weekly magazine *Knack*. 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 and a hint towards the demand of recognition of the Arab language as the fourth official Belgian language¹², which attracts massive media attention (most of it negative) and leads to a cascade of new interviews in all kinds of media (including all TV-chains). Whenever Abou Jahjah is now to appear in public, he would turn up surrounded by body guards, which in turn triggers debate on its own. An increasing number of mainstream politicians criticize the AEL and 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’.

Tensions with the local authorities of Antwerp rise in autumn 2002 when the AEL establishes a number of civil patrols in order to monitor racist police activity and spreads 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 plan Moroccans’ (*geïntegreerd plan Marokkanen*), which the AEL deems to be racist. In the police plan it is stated specific monitoring action would be taken to tackle criminal behaviour by youngsters of Moroccan origin. Once again, the AEL-counter-initiative attracts large scale media attention and triggers political debate about the lawfulness of such civil patrols (and to a minor extent about the problem of racism among the Antwerp police officers). The AEL also starts attracting the attention of foreign, mainly Dutch, media. Related to the Antwerp context, the AEL press-releases further radicalise and the organization is increasingly isolated by the Antwerp, Flemish and Belgian political establishment.

¹¹ 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.

¹² A statement he later revoked, stressing the journalists had exaggerated his argumentation on national minority rights.

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 Belgian¹³. There is immediate and ongoing rumour – of which AEL is one of the sources¹⁴ - that the murder was a racist act, comparable to a racial murder committed some months earlier in the Brussels municipality of Schaarbeek. In the Schaarbeek-tragedy a retired man, known to be a racist and 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 to the Schaarbeek tragedy - two days of riots broke out in *Borgerhout*, the location where the incident occurred and 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 may be the case, slogans in support of AEL accompany the urban riots.

With the prospect of elections to be held in a couple of months¹⁵, several high ranked politicians, including the Belgian prime minister and the minister of Justice, are thereupon tempted to blame the AEL of organizing the violence and a number of politicians call for outlawing the movement. In Parliament, the prime minister even states 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 announces 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 AEL calls for further calm. The next morning the largest Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* falsely reports arms had been found in the house of Abou Jahjah.

The following days, a number of publicists¹⁶ and academics¹⁷ 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 the AEL-leader has to be released due to a lack of incriminating elements, 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

¹³ Mr. Mohammed Achrak (27), a schoolteacher 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.

¹⁴ 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'. [AEL press-release, 'Slachtoffer diende reeds twee maal klacht in bij de politie', 27 November 2002.]

¹⁵ 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 15% of the Flemish electorate (the main national group in Belgium) and 33% of the electorate in Antwerp, Flanders largest city.

¹⁶ De Witte, L., Fraihi, T. & Lanoye, T. 'De jacht op Abou Jahjah is open', *De Standaard*, 28 November 2000.

¹⁷ Fadil, N., Jacobs, D., Marx, A., De Ley, H., Blommaert, J., Kanmaz, M. e.a., 'Open brief aan alle beleidsverantwoordelijken', *De Morgen*, 3 December 2002. Open letter to policy makers, signed by 207 academics.

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 press, from their side, the following weeks give a wide – and unprecedented - forum to 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 AEL to have rapidly increased (from 200 up to 2000).

Following the short imprisonment, attempts to destitute Abou Jahjah from Belgian citizenship, which he acquired through marriage, will fail. The judicial investigators will be unable to provide proof of the allegation that Abou Jahjah married under false pretexts only to become a Belgian (Labaki, 2003: 17-18). The fact he had lied in 1988 during his asylum-procedure, equally turns out unfit to be used as a legal ground to destitute him from Belgian citizenship (Ibid.: 13-16). And after inquiries into his political activities, the anti-terrorist cell of the federal police has to conclude an investigation by stating he is not being instrumentalised by the Middle East, while a state security report would conclude the AEL is in no way a dormant cell of any terrorist movement (Labaki, 2003: 58).

At the time of his liberation on 3 December 2002, Abou Jahjah - once again surrounded by body guards - is quick to hold a press-conference attended by Belgian and foreign journalists in which he swiftly switched between languages (Dutch, French and English) during his discourse. He announces wanting to sue prime minister Verhofstadt for libel, when accusing him of organizing criminal activities, and denounces the political interventions leading to his arrest. Abou Jahjah furthermore announced the AEL would not only aim at participating in the 2006 local elections in Antwerp but would already participate in the 2003 federal elections. This last announcement would materialise end February 2003, when the AEL stated it had decided to take part in the May 2003 Belgian federal elections in an alliance with the marginal maoist workers' party (PVDA-PTB) and individual leftist activists. The electoral list would be given the name 'RESIST' and would use the slogan 'the voice of resistance' as its baseline. All visible places would be taken by the AEL-leaders. The decision to participate already to the federal elections had 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 (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 47).

The dramatic events of November and December 2002 had not only been news in Belgium; it received world wide press attention, including coverage in *Time* and on CNN. The riots and the imprisonment of AEL-leader Abou Jahjah were very extensively covered by the Dutch press, as if it had been a domestic event. This hastened the announcement the AEL was planning to set up AEL-branches abroad, starting with the Netherlands (in March 2003). 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 the organization would proactively be forbidden on Dutch soil, while right-liberal politicians stressed they considered the AEL to be a dangerous organization to be monitored. The Dutch Minister of Justice denounced that the AEL would be forbidden in the Netherlands but did announce the secret service would investigate the preparations of the AEL of founding a section on Dutch soil. Soon afterwards, an opinion poll by the Dutch weekly *Contrast* in January 2003 shows

25% of the Moroccans in the Netherlands would vote for AEL if they would participate in the Dutch elections, while 52% would support the creation of a Dutch AEL chapter (Labaki, 2003: 45).

When Abou Jahjah went to the Netherlands in March 2003 for a number of debates and 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 for a maximum type of protection¹⁸ for Abou Jahjah, due to 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 arose¹⁹.

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 it was discouraged to vote for RESIST. More harmfully, in the popular Flemish newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* sources from the Justice department were cited, some weeks before the elections, claiming 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 attains 17.604 votes for the Senate (with 8.411 preferential votes for Abou Jahjah) and 10.059 votes in the province of Antwerp for the Chamber of representatives (with 5.891 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 (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 47). AEL admitted their electoral score was a disappointment – a ‘small defeat’ in their own words. But they equally stressed RESIST had achieved a ‘small victory’ by gaining 6.848 votes (or 2,5%) in the city of Antwerp (with 4.433 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 the results were proof of their claim to be 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 intellectuals²⁰ that the AEL would leave RESIST and form an own party with the name ‘Muslim-Democratic Party’ (*Moslim-Democratische Partij* - MDP).

The marginal electoral success did not rob the AEL of press attention, nor prevent the AEL to continue its actions. Early august 2003 the sheer announcement of the AEL founding a French section was news in both Belgium as the Netherlands. In Flanders, civil patrols were organized to monitor police behaviour at summer resorts, at the end of summer it was announced Muslim pupils’ councils would be installed in Flemish secondary schools and 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 headscarf²¹. In the Netherlands, AEL equally continued to deliver headline news. Quite some

¹⁸ Including police body guards, bullet proof vests, an armoured car and helicopter assistance.

¹⁹ A number of interesting e-mails 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.

²⁰ www.kif-kif.be

²¹ In most Francophone schools the wearing of the headscarf is forbidden (Bouselmati, 2002). In most Flemish schools it is not.

attention was triggered by a controversial interview broadcasted on the Dutch television (KRO) on 26 June 2003, in which Abou Jahjah stated to support death penalty 'for very severe criminals' and hesitated in condemning the mutilation - chopping off the hands - of thieves in Arab countries²².

AEL identity and ideology

As Bousetta and Swyngedouw (2003) correctly note, by focussing 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: both radical leftists, antiracists, Muslim progressives, radical Islamists as people without crystallized ideological views could be seduced by the actions and general discourse of AEL. At several instances, the AEL-leadership has swiftly manoeuvred in stressing 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 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 Swyngedouw (2003) stress it is at the same time in their strategic advantage to stick to diffuse identity politics. This is particularly clear with regard 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 do substantial effort to discursively construct a place for the recognition of Berber language and culture within the logic of an Arab nationalist program (see Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 26). It was particularly forced to do so when a new Flemish Berber movement, arguing 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 stressed its 'Muslim identity', thus equally wanting to appeal to other non-Arab immigrant groups.

In the same logic, there is no gain for the AEL in having a 'pure' ideological line as 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 'hyper local' dissatisfaction with the discriminatory and racist system in which they believe to be caught. In Bousetta and Swyngedouw's view the main demands of AEL-followers are not so much of a culturally differentialist kind, but indeed of a civic nature: integration (equal opportunities) and non-discrimination. In this regard, on the ideological level, the AEL-followers are even much closer to African-American protest movements than to Arab nationalists or Islamists in the Arab world, Bousetta and Swyngedouw (2003) assert.

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

²² It should probably be mentioned that Abou Jahjah was rather reluctant to answer these questions but was eagerly solicited by the interviewing TV-journalist.

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 website of the AEL²³, gives us reason to believe this is not a coincidence. Next to photos of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, slogans 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 the black radical activist. This link to Malcolm X is given the same prominence as a link to the file on the Case against Sharon and a link to a special webpage dedicated to the Egyptian Arab Nationalist Nasser. Moreover, in a personal interview²⁴, AEL-leader Dyab Abou Jahjah confirmed being genuinely inspired and influenced by both Malcolm X and Gamal Abdel Nasser and disputed the links on the website were 'mere' stylish or symbolic-strategic elements. In several interviews, Dyab Abou Jahjah himself compared the struggle of the AEL with the struggle of the Black Panthers.

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 (2003) have correctly argued that the AEL-leadership has been strategically opting for fostering an open, hybrid ideological line, combining both Arab nationalist, Muslim related and multicultural elements. Nevertheless, one can hardly argue 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 (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 18; Labaki, 2003: 19). This pan-Arabic state should be democratic and tolerant for non-Muslim inhabitants. It would, however, equally preclude the dismantlement of the Jewish state of Israel (De Neuter, 2003). 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 – who would only be interested in a *status quo* situation protecting the interests of the current Arab elites (Fokkema & Siepermann, 2003). 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 (Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 25; Labaki, 2003: 21). He claims the development of the AEL, stressing both an Arabic and an Islamic identity, can therefore not be denounced to be an artificial (or strategic) choice, but should be looked at as constituting the European reflection of this historical evolution in the Arab world (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 25-26).

Secondly, Dyab Abou Jahjah and the AEL try to uphold a consistent anti-assimilationist discourse within the Belgian, Dutch and European context (Abou Jahjah, 2002). 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 to the constitution and laws of the

²³ <http://www.arabeuropean.org>

²⁴ Informal personal interview on 25/2/2002 with AEL-leader Dyab Abou Jahjah in his home in Antwerp.

countries in which they live, should actively participate both as individuals and as a group in society and should actively use their constitutional right 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 policies aimed at improving the societal position of the most disfavoured groups in order to assure equal opportunities. In line with this view, 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 (Kymlicka, 1995), AEL pleads for recognition of ethnic diversity and the possibility for group differentiated rights. Clearly, the accent is on the possibilities this might create for the 'Arab community' in Europe. It is stressed the Arab language and culture should be fostered in Europe. Within the European context it is stressed the 'Arab community' should be considered as an 'European minority' (or in the context of European nation-states as a 'national minority'). If we frame this in the terminology of Kymlicka (1995), 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). The AEL stresses 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.

A look at AEL activist discourse and mobilization

AEL has quickly understood the potential of 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, AEL systematically and efficiently uses e-mail 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, e-mail (and internet-forums) equally function as an important means of communication between AEL-members. It is telling that internetcafé *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 quick mobilization for AEL-related events²⁵.

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 body-guards of Abou Jahjah at public interventions, the civic patrols monitoring the police, a number of veiled threats

²⁵ Illustrative is the account given in the internet-article 'Dyab Abou Jahjah (AEL) opgemerkt in Gent' by an AEL-sympathiser of the importance of SMS in mobilizing an audience for a speech by the AEL-leader.
[<http://www.arabeuropean.org/nederlands/lezinggent212002.html>]

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; it all amounts to an aggressive image of AEL. Although it is often more bluff and show than actual aggressiveness, AEL has done little to counter the image of being a 'strong', 'radical' and 'aggressive' organization. The reason for this is that it helps 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 Moroccan origin youngsters, taking into account their Muslim and macho identities and their frustrations about (perceived) discrimination, Abou Jahjah claimed. Exactly this is 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 AEL in even mobilizing those groups of youngsters of Moroccan origin which 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". But mainly when 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"²⁶, pinpoints the Pentagon and the White House as "legitimate targets" (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003: 42) and takes the defence of those Muslims who did not feel sad about the terrorist actions. He equally had no problem in suggesting adult victims of suicide bombings in Palestine should not be considered innocent (Ibid, 2003: 42) nor in stating 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 (Labaki, 2003: 17), is said to have stopped drinking alcohol and has stressed he has resumed the *praxis* of prayer and ramadan (Abou Jahjah & Othman, 2003). 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 interview²⁷ AEL-leader Dyab Abou Jahjah denounced my assertion this was proof of a particular strategy in which Muslim identity is used instrumentally by the AEL-leader as a political *entrepreneur* who has understood the increasing political salience of Islam in the post 9-11 era among immigrant youngsters. He nevertheless confirmed it is clear that the fact of being a 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 mobilising factor. The AEL-leadership systematically

²⁶ [<http://www.ahram.org.eg/weekly/2002/603/sc121.htm>]

²⁷ Informal personal interview on 25/2/2002 with AEL-leader Dyab Abou Jahjah in his home in Antwerp.

tries to deny that AEL is also anti-semitic, when it is confronted by repeated anti-Jewish incidents committed by AEL-sympathisers. Their rebuttals, in which it is stressed Arabs are equally to be considered Semitic as the 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 (Labaki, 2003: 24):

"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"²⁸.

Explaining the phenomenon of the Arab European League

In their research Koopmans and Statham (1998, 2003) document that the national context in the country of residence is of great importance for the forms of mobilization undertaken by immigrant groups and even influences transnational demands. 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 postnational membership (Soysal, 1994) has rendered the national context largely irrelevant and that migrants increasingly claim multicultural group rights in all Western nation-states.

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. They equally claim they 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 sending country's policies with regard to its emigrants on types of migrant claims making. They predict an influence of sending countries' policies to either stimulate assimilation of their (former) subjects into the host society or the 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 claims making, Koopmans and Statham pinpoint to 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 categorisations like 'immigrant' or 'ethnic minority' -, receiving states can influence the genesis or alteration of migrants' identities.

Koopmans and Statham empirically investigated 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 there is a potential bias

²⁸ The English version of the mission statement of AEL is to be found at: [<http://www.arabeuropean.org/aboutus.html>]

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' (Koopmans & Statham, 2003: 216). 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 states of their settlement societies (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.

Since a couple of years, Belgium has a very liberal nationality legislation. Within the Belgian federal context the Flemish and Francophone communities develop their own policies concerning immigrants or ethnic minority groups (Jacobs, 2001). On Flemish side, there is official recognition of the existence of ethnic-cultural minority groups, the incorporation model focusses on group emancipation and immigrant self-organization is endorsed. On Francophone side, on the contrary, an individualist and assimilationist policy model prevails and institutionalisation 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, on the other hand, had 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. It is, however, a lot less in line with the Koopmans and Statham perspective, that the main identity marker, *Arab-Europeanness*, is an unknown categorisation 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 future 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 as the UK, Sweden or the Netherlands, but in a more hostile environment as Antwerp (Flanders). It furthermore is 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 the largest non-EU immigrant group, accounting for 4,6% of the population in 1999)²⁹, are in a structurally disadvantaged position (Bousetta, 2001). 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 this population resides in a rather hostile anti-immigrant environment. As Hassan Bousetta and Marc Swyngedouw (2003) note, Moroccans in Antwerp have traditionally tried to

²⁹ Obviously, the number of people of Moroccan origin is higher. There are, however, no official figures available in Belgium taking account of ethnic identity.

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. Large immigrant organizations, dominated by Moroccans, 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 the immigrant interests at the negotiating table(s). At odds with practices of other immigrant organizations in Antwerp (and Flanders and Belgium at large), newcomer AEL has soon chosen to manifest itself through the street (Ibidem: 2003).

Bousetta and Swyngedouw (2003) argue that looked at from a purely strategic point of view, regardless of moral judgements one might have, the confrontational style cannot be easily dismissed as being a tactical error within the Belgium context. Following the uncoordinated street riots of 1991, 1993 and 1997 involving immigrant youngsters in Brussels, regional and federal politicians have taken important steps in 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 (Bousetta & Swyngedouw, 2003; Fox Piven & Cloward, 1997).

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 in Belgium clearly less the case in 2003 than it was ten years earlier. At the start of the new millennium, with one of the most liberal nationality legislations of the world, a decade of efforts to implement an integration policy, new anti-discrimination laws, active support (from Flemish side) for immigrant organizations and electoral competition between mainstream political parties for the immigrant vote, the political opportunity structures for immigrant claims making have probably been never so favourable in Belgium than nowadays.

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 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 AEL has been mainly the product of its rhetorical efforts to convince concerned immigrant groups 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 in denouncing politicians of immigrant origin as 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 fifties to designate black citizens, which were educated and co-opted by the Belgian colonialists in the Congo but officially remained second class citizens (Bousetta & Swyngedouw, 2003).

Bousetta and Swyngedouw (2003) correctly pinpoint a number of factors why the Antwerp context proved to be fertile ground for the AEL discourse and its deviant forms of immigrant contestation. Immigrant groups have in Antwerp – although it is clearly not a factor limited to this city - largely remained structurally disfavoured on the labour- and housing market and over time problems have rather increased than decreased (Bousetta, 2001). It is, hence, understandable that a part of the (Antwerp) immigrant youngsters are no longer willing to opt for docile reactions which have characterised 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 the city has known a rapid electoral growth of the extreme-right wing and racist party the *Vlaams Blok* since 1988 (now being the largest party in the city), since 1994 condemning all other parties 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 for a politics of integration. Given this situation, the immigrant origin politicians were unable to show for much result, which led to the sentiment among sections of the immigrant population 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' (Koopmans & Statham, 2003: 207), not only have to give theoretical room for immigrant voice on paper, they equally have to function in reality in leading to influence of, and generating political power for, immigrant actors. This explains why the AEL had most success in gaining ground in Antwerp, in which immigrant origin politicians were unable to achieve pivotal political positions in local policy making. 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 (Jacobs, Martiniello & Réa, 2002). Although large parts of the immigrant population are in Brussels equally 'trapped' in disfavoured neighbourhoods as is the case in Antwerp, immigrant origin politicians have recently been able to gain considerable political influence and the immigrant origin population increasingly constitutes a considerable electoral force to be taken into account. Classical venues of political participation at least hold the promise of improvement for immigrant groups, potentially triggered through 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 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 got imported, although venues to political power are *de facto* better accessible and interethnic relations are less tense over there than 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-leftists organizations. Within the logic of the AEL this would be labelled as self-evident forms of transnational mobilization³⁰ related to the 'Arab nation', but looked at from an outsider perspective, this is hardly the case in strict sense. Indeed, most youngsters involved in the demonstrations are of Moroccan descent and have no genuine links with either Palestine (or Lebanon) nor Iraq. Nevertheless, the AEL has somehow succeeded in mobilising 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 the '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 predictions in the POS-approach, in which it is assessed that transnational claims-making is most prevalent in receiving states which offer little opportunities to migrants to influence the policy process and symbolically exclude them for the national community.

Conclusion and 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 indeed clearly have mobilising 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 the AEL-success among its adherents. The bulk of its followers is mainly attracted by its firm stress on the opposition between the excluded and the included, of which AEL takes the defence of the underdog position of the excluded of immigrant

³⁰ Basch et alii (1994) 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" (Basch et alii., 1994: 6).

(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, the 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 the AEL is up to date a small organization in modest European countries, one might even label the Arab-Islamic ideological line as being megalomane.

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 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 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 it is a good thing for immigrant emancipation and peaceful coexistence of different groups is another matter. Although the AEL cannot be blamed to be responsible for growth of the extreme right-wing party *Vlaams Blok* up to date, its confrontational style might be one more element clearing the path for the racist *Vlaams Blok* taking over political power in Antwerp, Flanders largest city, in the 2006 local elections.

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 criminalisation of the organization have made an elephant out of what once was a mouse. By opting for direct confrontation on the street level, clear multicultural demands and fluctuating strategic stress on Muslim and 'Arab pride' identity, the AEL has been able to gain the sympathy of important groups of immigrant youngsters. In the meanwhile, the press was both puzzled and fascinated by its pan-Arabic and Muslim identity claims, its conceptualisation 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, for their side, was 'tricked' in making 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 (1999, 2003) 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 the POS-

approach can indeed also help us to shed light on a phenomenon 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 case of the AEL illustrates that a confrontational mobilization style, distancing itself from the dominant incorporation 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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