Racialisation and counter-radicalisation: a study of Dutch policy frameworks

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Abstract

Counter-radicalisation measures have been criticised for stigmatising Muslim communities. However, little research exists on racialisation in policy frameworks found in counter-radicalisation policy documents themselves. Analysis of these documents can reveal whether and how racialising patterns emerge in bureaucracy at the national level, because policy documents circulate and institutionalise regulatory, administrative power. This paper presents a study of counter-radicalisation policy documents developed by the Dutch government, a pioneer in counter-radicalisation policy. A computer-assisted qualitative content analysis of policy documents was conducted and then contextualised using interviews with policy makers and executives. The policy documents were found to securitise Muslims, constructing them as potentially risky/at risk and as ‘Other’ communities. Using a theoretical framework that takes racialisation to be a particular essentialised construction of group membership, the analysis presents a nuanced answer to the question if counter-radicalisation policy frameworks racialise Muslims. There is evidence for racialisation, as well as for conscious efforts to prevent this effect. Insights from this study support appeals to reconsider the national security policy framework that expects Muslims to take responsibility for preventing radicalisation and terrorism.

Keywords Counter-radicalisation · Racialisation · Securitisation · Muslims · The Netherlands
Introduction

Scholars and organisations in recent years have urged governments to heed the far-reaching consequences of their counter-radicalisation policies (e.g., Baker-Beall et al. 2015; Fadil et al. 2019a), pointing out how the measures implemented by these policies violate people’s fundamental rights and freedoms and stigmatise Muslim communities (e.g., Sharma and Nijjar 2018; Choudhury 2017; Vermeulen and Bovenkerk 2012; Van Meeteren and Van Oostendorp 2019). Moreover, several authors argue that counter-radicalisation practices are racialised (e.g., Fekete 2004; Kundnani 2014; Medovoi 2012). Their studies help make visible how counter-radicalisation mechanisms are embedded in a larger context and history. However, there has been little research on racialisation in the counter-radicalisation policy frameworks found in policy documents, though such documents circulate and institutionalise regulatory, administrative power (Hesse 2007). To efficiently prevent or halt racialisation, it is important to know if changes to policy frameworks are required or if time and effort should primarily be focused on improving practices on the ground.

This study therefore explores racialisation in counter-radicalisation policy frameworks of the Dutch national government by analysing policy documents, contextualised by interviews with counter-radicalisation professionals. Positioned at the intersection of critical security studies and critical race studies, it seeks to contribute to existing scholarship by investigating whether the racialisation that has been found in counter-radicalisation practices is also present in counter-radicalisation policy frameworks. The focus on national policy frameworks provides insight into the prevalence of certain patterns and, considering the Netherlands’ pioneering role in the development of counter-radicalisation policies in Europe and beyond (Coolsaet 2019), whether those patterns may be found in other states’ policies as well.

In this article, I first summarise the development of Dutch counter-radicalisation policies and present the main critiques regarding their securitisation and racialisation of Muslims. This criticism leads to the theoretical framework I used, detailed in Sect. 2. I then present my methodology and discuss three main results from my analysis of Dutch policy documents. Finally, I connect these results to the literature discussed in Sect. 1 and to insights from interviews with counter-radicalisation professionals.

My analysis shows that Dutch counter-radicalisation policy documents securitise Muslims, constructing them as potentially risky/at risk and as belonging to communities that are, to a certain extent, seen as alien within the state. Simultaneously, though, the documents display efforts to prevent stereotyping of Muslims. Interviews with counter-radicalisation professionals show that they are aware of and struggle with the tension between upholding the principle of equal treatment while also considering factors that may be specific to particular groups. Based on a theoretical framework that takes racialisation to be a particular essentialised construction of group membership, the analysis presents a nuanced answer to the question if counter-radicalisation policy framework racialise certain
groups. There is evidence for racialisation of Muslims, as well as for conscious efforts to prevent this. The paper concludes by discussing the implication that the Netherlands should reconsider using the framework of approaching Muslims as co-producers of national security in its efforts to counter radicalisation.

Counter-radicalisation policies and scholarly criticism

The development of Dutch counter-radicalisation policies

In 1991, the Dutch Internal Security Service started publishing annual reports about its activities, including those aimed at countering terrorism. By the end of that decade, the Dutch response to terrorism was a so-called comprehensive approach that combined criminal justice (repressive) and preventive approaches (Wittendorp et al. 2017). The Internal Security Service aimed not only to gather information about networks and actors who were considered potentially dangerous or involved in political violence but also to conduct meta-analyses of shifting social dynamics (Fadil and De Koning 2019, p. 56). In response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Dutch government presented the Counter-terrorism and Security Action Plan (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2001). A policy vision declaring the comprehensive approach to be official government policy followed in 2003 (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2003). The primary concern with detection and criminal prosecution in the years that followed meant that there was less official policy attention given to prevention. This changed in August 2005, when the government introduced its policy to counter radicalisation (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding 2005).

The arrival of counter-radicalisation policies and practices articulated the shift that had been happening in Dutch discourse on security throughout the nineties, from perceiving political violence predominantly through a lens of political actions and causes to seeing it through a lens of belief systems and ideology (Fadil et al. 2019b, p. 4). During the same period, there was a growing perception that the integration of (especially Turkish and Moroccan) migrants and the shift to a multi-ethnic society presented a particular challenge for security (Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst 1998, 2000, 2001). In 2001, the Internal Security Service explicitly tied this idea to the term radicalisation. In 2004, two incidents encouraged a further shift in the focus of security policies, particularly counter-radicalisation policies: the Madrid bombings and the murder of Theo van Gogh, a Dutch writer and movie director (in)famous for his critique of Islam (Vermeulen 2014; Fadil et al. 2019b). The Madrid bombings signified that European territory was no longer exempt from terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda (Fadil et al. 2019b). This idea was strengthened by the bombings in London in 2005. After the Madrid bombings, the Netherlands appointed a National Coordinator of Counterterrorism (NCTb) and, a year later, established an organisation (renamed the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) in 2008). The NCTV is tasked with drawing up threat analyses; developing, recalibrating and coordinating counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policies (based on those and other analyses); and coordinating efforts to strengthen the resilience of citizens, companies, structures, networks and vital sectors (NCTV, n.d.).
After Theo van Gogh’s murder by Mohammed Bouyeri, who was known to visit mosques that academics and experts considered Salafi (a movement within Islam), Dutch counter-radicalisation policies focused on ‘Salafism’ in particular as a possible incubator of terrorist violence.

The Madrid and London bombings boosted adoption of the Dutch ‘comprehensive approach’ and of the term radicalisation in counter-terrorism discourse in the United Kingdom and the European Union (Fadil et al. 2019b, p. 9; Coolsaet 2019). In the years that followed, the United Kingdom joined the Netherlands in pioneering counter-radicalisation policies. For example, the Netherlands and the UK initiated the Policy Planners Network on Countering Polarisation and Radicalisation, a grouping of mid-level interior ministry officials from 10 to 12 European countries, which ran from 2008 to 2019 (Fadil et al. 2019b). By the mid 2010s, both the European Union and the United Nations had adopted resolutions and published action plans for countering radicalisation that were in line with the frameworks initiated by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, thereby giving the discourse on radicalisation a global resonance.

The prevention of radicalisation consists of three elements: actively challenging radicals and their facilitators, stimulating societal resilience and strengthening individuals’ and communities’ ties with society and the ‘democratic legal order’ (Nationale Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding 2005). The rationale behind the framework of radicalisation in relation to terrorism is that there must be a process during which a person turns from a ‘normal’ individual into a terrorist (Fadil and De Koning 2019). Counter-radicalisation is aimed at intervening in this process during different phases of an individual’s or a community’s life. It works pre-emptively through civil society and semi-public spaces, using an anticipatory logic (De Goede and Simon 2013; Monaghan and Molnar 2016). To change the behaviour and attitudes of potential extremists, policies aim at changing the social context in which radicalisation could develop, employing a broad approach focusing on social issues (Vermeulen and Bovenkerk 2012). Thus, multiple government bodies at national and local levels as well as non-governmental organisations are involved in counter-radicalisation approaches. Community policing, education, social work and healthcare services have all been influenced by counter-radicalisation imperatives (Veldhuis and Lindenber 2012; Fadil et al. 2019a; Wittendorp 2022; Van de Weert and Eijkman 2021; Schmid 2021).

Critique of counter-radicalisation policies

With the increasing presence of counter-radicalisation policies, their discourse, adoption and dissemination have been critically examined (e.g., Baker-Beall et al. 2015; Abbas 2021). Scholars have predominantly focused on policies written in English, though more recently policies written in Dutch have also been examined (e.g., Fadil et al. 2019a; Van de Weert and Eijkman 2021; Vermeulen and Bovenkerk 2012; Vermeulen 2014; Van Meeteren and Van Oostendorp 2019).

In one of the central genealogies of the discourse of radicalisation, Kundnani (2012) unpacks the circulation of the term in English-speaking countries, exhibiting
how it produces a framework that does not account for the political dimensions of social and political tensions. Similarly, several other authors argue that the discourse enables externalisation of responsibility for political discontent (Baker-Beall et al. 2015). In other words, the role of government policies and practices in (providing reasons for) radicalisation are insufficiently recognised in radicalisation discourse (e.g., Abbas 2021; Field 2017). Instead, radicalisation and extremism discourse explain political discontent through ideological and social–psychological factors. Several authors argue this lack of recognition for political dimensions is part of the way in which radicalisation discourse constructs a religious, racialised Other (e.g., Fekete 2004; Rana 2017).

Unpacking this critique in the Dutch context, Fadil et al. (2019b) and De Graaf (2011) argue that the link between radicalisation and ethnicity made in early radicalisation policies and discourses turned into a focus on political militancy of Muslims in Europe. Similarly, Vermeulen and Bovenkerk (2012) state that although a focus on religion is not very visible in policy reports, it did play a role in the implementation of some policy goals. The focus on Islam and Muslims as threats to social cohesion has, according to these scholars, ‘triggered a securitisation of Islam and Muslims and an “Islamisation of security”’ (Fadil et al. 2019b, p. 11). According to several authors (e.g., Vermeulen 2014; Van Meeteren and Van Oostendorp 2019; Baker-Beall et al. 2015; Pantazis and Pemberton 2009), this political and public discourse constructs Muslims as a suspect community.

Additionally, Ragazzi asserts that counter-terrorist policies produce and reinforce ‘government of society in discrete and divided ethno-religious groups’ (2016, abstract; see also 2022). Several scholars connect this to racialisation, arguing that the securitisation of Islam through radicalisation policies and discourse takes the form of an externalisation of violence into racialised ‘Others’ (Fadil et al. 2019b; Fekete 2004; De Graaf 2011; Nguyen 2019). In simpler terms, terrorism is associated with Muslims and Muslims with terrorism; the fear of a terrorist threat that is unknown, yet will come, is embodied by ‘the Muslim’ (Selod 2018; Sharma and Nijjar 2018). Though these studies employ the concept of racialisation in their critiques, an explanation of what the authors take it to mean—and how it can be linked to religion—is often absent (Groothuis 2020). Because racialisation can be considered a contested concept, the next section elaborates on the interpretation employed in this paper.

**Theoretical framework**

In the analyses described in the previous section, two themes come together: the racialisation of Muslims and their construction as suspicious. Medovoi (2012) terms this type of conjunction dogma-line racism. Whereas race is often primarily associated with discrimination on the basis of biological or phenotypical characteristics, dogma-line racism has a mental or psycho-political root; it ‘proceeds as if its racial other either was or could be corporeally undetectable’ (ibid., p. 48, emphasis original). The dogma-line racialised Other threatens through a covert war: ‘due to how they think and what they believe, they actively seek to infiltrate and destroy us’
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Building on this work, as well as related theories of race (e.g., Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Essed and Goldberg 2002; Goldberg 2006; Meer 2013; Meer and Modood 2009; Topolski 2018) and critical security studies employing the concept of racialisation (e.g., Bayoumi 2006; Fekete 2004; Kundnani 2014; Rana 2017; Selod 2018), I follow De Koning in understanding racialisation as the process of ‘imputing generalised and essentialised ideas about biological, cultural and religious differences’ to groups and categorising people in such groups on the basis of certain markers (2020, p. 4). This means that (those labelled as) Muslims can be racialised and thereby socially constructed as, for example, backward, dangerous and foreign, on the basis of markers such as skin colour, religious affiliation and language skills (Lauwers 2019). A person with these markers is considered part of ‘the Muslim community’, thereby justifying a probabilistic suspicion towards certain behaviour. A similar line of thinking is also present in criticism on the construction of Muslims as a suspect community. However, whereas one could, theoretically at least, escape religious discrimination through conversion and thereby escape the suspect community, no such escape is possible when one is racialised (Bayoumi 2006; Lauwers 2019). Moreover, the concept of racialisation helps embed analyses in a larger socio-political and historical context (e.g., Topolski 2018; Fadil 2016).

In this article, I use this conceptualisation of racialisation to explore how Dutch counter-radicalisation policies have described, contextualised and constructed different forms of radicalisation and extremism and the people thought to be (at risk of being/becoming) involved in them. The following section outlines my research methodology.

**Methodology**

Central to the research was a computer-assisted qualitative content analysis (CAQCA) of publicly available Dutch counter-radicalisation policy documents. The results of this analysis were contextualised through interviews with policy makers and executives.¹

**Data collection**

Policy documents were gathered from the Dutch national government public archive using the search terms ‘radicaliseren’, ‘radicalisatie’, [both Dutch terms for radicalisation], ‘radicalisme’ [radicalism], ‘extremisme’ [extremism], ‘contra-radicaliseren’, and ‘contra-radicalisatie’, both together and individually. The NCTV defines radicalisation as ‘a process of increasing willingness to accept the extreme consequences of a way of thinking and to put it into action’ and extremism as a ‘phenomenon in which persons or groups are prepared to seriously violate the law

¹ The coding scheme and the lists of analysed policy documents and interview topics are publicly accessible on the platform DataverseNL.
or to engage in activities that undermine the democratic legal order for ideological motives’ (2016).

The documents selected were ministry, national government and NCTV (and its predecessor) documents from 2004—the start of the comprehensive approach to countering counter-radicalisation—to 2020 that outlined theoretical/conceptual frameworks and general (i.e., state-level) strategies, programmes, approaches, action plans and guides and that were primarily concerned with counter-radicalisation. Together, the selected documents represent, describe and/or explain official government policies. Reports, evaluations, discussions/debates and other types of documents that focus on reviewing or reporting on discussions about counter-radicalisation policies were excluded. This procedure resulted in a selection of 28 documents, together comprising 515 pages.

Data analysis

The selected documents were categorised according to their focus (see Table 1). Policy documents were divided into two categories: those without a specific focus (in regular text) and those focusing on a specific type of radicalisation or extremism (in italics). This categorisation ensured that results, such as the number of times specific groups were mentioned, could be analysed while taking into account the documents’ aim.

All documents were imported into Atlas.ti (version 9), a CAQCA tool that allowed for central management of the data and facilitated a rigorous and replicable coding process. For the analysis, a preliminary coding scheme was developed on the basis of the literature and then expanded as different aspects were identified while coding. This scheme included codes for type of extremism; focus on specific groups such as Muslims, non-migrants, migrants, and nationalists; measures (e.g., dialogue, education, intelligence) and links to other themes (employment, equality, identity, etc.); as well as others. Additional codes based on the data included, for example, factors used to explain the process of radicalisation and terms that frame individuals, groups or society (e.g., open, risk, undemocratic, legal, free, deceptive). Every time a new code was added to the coding scheme, all previously coded texts were checked for applicability of the new code. Thus, the coding process was iterative and structured.

Once all the data was coded, thematic codes were generated based on aspects relevant to the main research question, such as ‘culture’, ‘politics’ and ‘intelligence approach’. Documents were filtered by categorisation (with or without focus on a specific type of radicalisation or extremism). This approach allowed analysis of how often and in what manner different themes, specifically mentioned groups and types of radicalisation or extremism were linked to each other in the policy documents. In this way, both the predominance of and meaning given to certain constructions became visible. The following section discusses the results of this analysis.

Furthermore, six semi-structured interviews were held with counter-radicalisation policy makers and executives. Each interview lasted 1–2 h. The interviews provided a contextualisation of the policy documents, as the interviewees shared their
Table 1 Overview of analysed policy documents and terrorist attacks in the European Union

| Year | Title of studied policy documents                                                                 | Terrorist attacks                        |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 2004 |                                                                                                   | Madrid train bombings (March)            |
|      |                                                                                                   | Murder Theo van Gogh (Amsterdam) (November) |
|      |                                                                                                   | Resilience against radicalisation of Muslim youth (March) |
|      |                                                                                                   | Resilience and integration policy (August) |
|      |                                                                                                   | Radicalism and radicalisation 2004–2005 (August) |
|      |                                                                                                   | Local and judicial approach to radicalism and radicalisation (September) |
|      |                                                                                                   | Approach to hotbeds of radicalisation (December) |
| 2005 | Guideline counter-terrorism on a local level (March)                                               | London bombings (July)                   |
|      | Resilience and integration policy (August)                                                        |                                          |
|      | Radicalism and radicalisation 2004–2005 (August)                                                  |                                          |
|      | Local and judicial approach to radicalism and radicalisation (September)                          |                                          |
|      | Approach to hotbeds of radicalisation (December)                                                  |                                          |
| 2006 | Guideline counter-terrorism on a local level (March)                                               |                                          |
| 2007 | Actualisation programmes resilience and integration policy (July)                                |                                          |
|      | Government reaction and policy explanation regarding report Radical dawa in transformation (October) |                                          |
|      | Action plan polarisation and radicalisation 2007–2011 (November)                                |                                          |
| 2008 | Operational action plan polarisation and radicalisation 2008 (March)                              |                                          |
|      | Operational action plan polarisation and radicalisation 2009 (December)                           |                                          |
| 2009 | Intensification approach animal rights extremism (March)                                           |                                          |
|      | Animal rights extremism (June)                                                                    |                                          |
| 2010 | Policy vision Security and radicalisation OCW (November)                                           | Norway attacks (July)                    |
| 2011 | Operational action plan polarisation and radicalisation 2010 (January)                            |                                          |
| 2012 | National counter-terrorism strategy 2011–2015 (April)                                              |                                          |
|      | Integral approach terrorism (November)                                                            |                                          |
| 2013 |                                                                                                   |                                          |
| 2014 | Action programme integral approach Jihadism (August)                                              |                                          |
|      | Guideline for the approach to radicalisation and counter-terrorism on a local level (November)     |                                          |
| 2015 | Adolescent, troublesome or radicalising? (July)                                                   | Île-de-France attacks (January)           |
|      |                                                                                                   | Paris attacks (November)                 |
| 2016 | National counter-terrorism strategy 2016–2020 (June)                                              | Brussels bombings (March)                |
| Year  | Title of studied policy documents                                                                 | Terrorist attacks                                           |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2017  | Guideline person-oriented approach preventing radicalisation and extremism (May)                   | Nice truck attacks (July)                                   |
|       | Make sure you belong! Integration nota 2007–2011 (May)                                            | Berlin Christmas market attack (December)                   |
|       |                                                                                                  | Manchester Area bombing (May)                               |
|       |                                                                                                  | London Bridge attack (June)                                 |
|       |                                                                                                  | Barcelona attacks (August)                                  |
| 2018  | Approach prevention radicalisation (April)                                                        |                                                            |
|       | Integral approach extremist speakers (May)                                                        |                                                            |
| 2019  | Report integral approach terrorism December 2017–April 2019 (April)                              |                                                            |
|       | *Explanation government policy regarding foreign fighters/travellers (May)*                      |                                                            |
|       | *Nationwide approach animal rights extremism (October)*                                          |                                                            |
| 2020  |                                                                                                  | Hanau shootings (February)                                  |
perspectives on and experiences with the development and focus of Dutch counter-radicalisation policies. These insights, presented in Sect. 5, helped to connect the policy documents to each other and hence to the larger policy framework.

**Results: attention, association, approach**

This paper focuses on three main results: (1) the predominance of attention paid to Islamic extremism, Muslims, people with migrant backgrounds and foreign fighters (individuals that have joined an armed conflict abroad) compared to other forms of extremism and groups of people, (2) the difference in associations made per type of extremism and (3) the dominance of intelligence gathering as a preventive approach to Islamic extremism in contrast to other types of extremism.

**Differences in attention**

As shown in Table 2, there is a noteworthy difference in how often Islamic extremism is mentioned compared to other forms of extremism, as well as how often Muslims, ‘ethnic’ groups and people with a ‘migrant background’ are mentioned compared to other groups of people.

| Type of extremism          | Total quotes: all documents | Total quotes: documents not focusing on specific type of radicalisation or extremism |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Animal extremism           | 92                          | 41                                                                               |
| Islamic extremism\(a\)    | 99                          | 71                                                                               |
| Left-wing extremism        | 16                          | 16                                                                               |
| Right-wing extremism       | 33                          | 31                                                                               |
| Other                      | 16                          | 15                                                                               |

| Type of people             | Total quotes: all documents | Total quotes: documents not focusing on specific type of radicalisation or extremism |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Muslims                    | 98                          | 76                                                                               |
| Ethnic groups              | 22                          | 20                                                                               |
| People with a migrant background\(b\) | 47                          | 41                                                                               |
| Non-migrants\(c\)         | 13                          | 12                                                                               |
| Minority                   | 9                           | 9                                                                                |
| Nationalists               | 1                           | 1                                                                                |
| Neo-Nazi’s                 | 2                           | 1                                                                                |

\(a\)Documents mostly use the term Jihadism to denote Islamic extremism, I have chosen to use the latter term throughout this paper, because all other forms of extremism are described including the word ‘extremism’

\(b\)This code includes several formulations: ‘people with a migrant background’, ‘allochthones’, and ‘migrants’

\(c\)Documents usually formulated this as ‘autochthone’
Although animal rights extremism is mentioned almost as often as Islamic extremism across the analysed documents, this changes significantly when filtering for documents not focused on a specific type of radicalisation or extremism. This aligns with the relative difference in the number of times Islamic versus animal rights extremism co-occur with links to risk (16 to 5, respectively, for all documents and 11 to 3, respectively, for documents with no specific focus). When animal extremism is linked to risk, documents focus on the threat posed to specific targets rather than discussing the process potentially leading to extremism. Left-wing and right-wing extremism are not regarded as a significant terrorist risk in the researched documents.

This is illustrated in the following example. The presence of right-wing activism or extremism within 44 municipalities is considered an issue of public order and is contrasted with the private, ‘indoor’ manifestations of Muslim extremists:

A possible explanation that this problem is particularly striking for municipalities is that associated manifestations (destruction, vandalism, nuisance for loitering youth, whether or not in combination with alcohol and drug problems) mainly take place on the street and thus attract the attention of the police and street workers more quickly than, for example, Muslim extremists, who manifest themselves more indoors. (…) The nature and scope of the problem is therefore not such that it could be considered a threat to national security; it is primarily a public order issue. (‘Voortgangsrapportage 2009 en operationeel actieplan polarisatie en radicalisering 2010’ 2009, p. 6)²

This view aligns with that of a policy document providing guidelines for teachers, which stated that young Muslim extremists are adept at keeping their true intentions hidden from the adults around them, noting that many jihadist activities take place ‘in secret, away from home and school’ (Spee and Reitsma, n.d., p. 12).

More generally, when documents concerned with specific types of extremism are excluded, Muslims are the most often mentioned of all labelled groups, followed by people with migrant backgrounds. Interestingly, in the Action Plan Polarisation and Radicalisation for 2009 policy document, which specifies animal activism, right-wing radicalisation and right-wing extremism three times more than Islamic radicalisation and extremism (3, 3 and 3 times versus 1 and 1 times, respectively), Muslims are still specifically mentioned six times.

Notably, nationalists and neo-Nazis are mentioned only once in the analysed documents despite the association between right-wing extremism and (ultra)nationalism made in the media and by the NCTV (2021) and the attention paid to right-wing extremism in counter-radicalisation documents. No other groups associated with right-wing extremism were singled out in the analysed documents nor were specific groups identified with types of extremism other than Islamic extremism.

² All translations in this paper are by the author, who is a native Dutch speaker.
**Difference in associations**

A second insight concerns associating forms of extremism with political issues. Given the government definition of extremism as ‘the phenomenon in which people or groups are willing, for ideological reasons, to seriously violate the law or engage in activities that undermine the democratic legal order’ (NCTV 2016, p. 3), it is not surprising that all forms of extremism are associated with politics. However, the focus of these associations differs for each type of extremism.

Islamic extremism and radicalisation are linked to international developments in Iraq and Afghanistan or in ‘the Arab world’ and to the (perceived/experienced) social–economic disadvantages and discrimination of Muslims in Europe. According to a guide aimed at helping teachers identify and potentially prevent ‘derailment’, Islamic radicalisation is most common among Muslim youth searching for meaning; it is linked to a religious or philosophical [levensbeschouwelijke] dimension or to a connection with and acknowledgement by their peer group (the so-called social–cultural dimension) (Spee and Reitsma, n.d., pp. 8–9). The guide also states that ‘an important part of the breeding ground for radicalisation is involvement with international developments, especially the turmoil and experienced injustice in the Arabic world. The strong growth of Jihadism in the Netherlands can only be understood in this context’ (p. 8). The link between international developments in North Africa and the Middle East, especially the rise of ISIS (also known as the Islamic State, ISIL or Daesh), and developments associated with Islamic radicalisation and extremism in the Netherlands such as an increase in foreign fighters is present in several policy documents, including the latest counter-terrorism strategy.

When providing reasons for right-wing extremism and radicalisation, policies regularly mention ethnic conflicts, social tensions between different groups and frustrations about the so-called multicultural society. Policy documents state that right-wing radicalisation often occurs among youth experiencing this frustration, which they see as the cause of unemployment or housing shortages (e.g., Spee and Reitsma, n.d., pp. 8–9; Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2005a, p. 16). Religious or philosophical dimensions are not considered to play an important role in right-wing extremism or radicalisation.

This difference in how Islamic extremism and right-wing extremism are viewed is also illustrated in the following quote, which documents topics that were discussed during a series of evening sessions in which youths could talk to ‘heroes/role models’:

Issues that are discussed from the perspective of Islamic extremism are: being a woman and Muslim, homosexuality, mixed sports, democracy, wearing a headscarf or other visible religious expressions, marriage, etc. When the discussion focuses on countering right-wing extremism, it concerns issues such as identity, equal opportunities and the democratic constitutional state, and the discussion focusses on persistent misunderstandings. Examples of these misunderstandings are: the Netherlands will be taken over by Muslims in the foreseeable future, and Muslims will take all jobs from native Dutch people. (‘Operationeel actieplan polarisatie en radicalisering 2008’ 2008, p. 6)
Other groups are also viewed differently. Animal rights extremism and activism are described as focusing on the rights and well-being of animals. Left-wing extremism and activism are described as focusing on anti-globalism or on the rights and well-being of asylum seekers and refugees. (The NCTV’s current definition also includes anti-capitalism and anti-liberalism as important characteristics.) They are not linked to more specific political themes. Rather, the focus for these last two types of extremism/radicalisation concerns cases in which those involved in them violate the law. In other words, rather than providing examples of discussion topics or specific political concerns of people at risk of involvement in animal rights or left-wing extremism, policy documents explicitly refer to the difference between activism, considered a legal activity, and extremism, considered illegal, when discussing these types.

This difference is also evident in integration policies focused on increasing resilience and countering polarisation and radicalisation: Islamic and right-wing radicalisation are priority themes of these policies; left-wing and animal rights radicalisation are not. While radicalisation and extremism are generally considered a concern for social cohesion, this concern is often mentioned in relation to integration and conflicts between people with and without ‘migrant backgrounds’ and of different ‘cultures’ or ‘ethnicities’.

**Differences in intelligence approach dominance**

Lastly, there is a noteworthy difference in the presence of an intelligence approach to counter Islamic extremism in contrast to other forms of extremism. For all forms of extremism, several hotlines exist for concerned citizens and professionals to report their suspicions or worries and to get information, advice and other forms of help. Policies also point out the development of training to deal with or counter extremism. Furthermore, they document an integral approach in which cooperation and the exchange of information between different (local, national and international) governmental organisations as well as other partners is stimulated. Part of this approach is intelligence creation by local police; a policy document explains how police ‘contact with, for example, the Muslim communities and right-wing youth has ensured that the commitment to identify and detect signs of terrorism and radicalisation has been strengthened’ (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2005b, p. 7).

For Islamic extremism, however, policies place more emphasis on these approaches and speak about them more specifically. They also mention additional forms of intelligence creation. Several documents highlight the support and training that the NCTV and other institutions have developed to help educational institutions, municipalities, leaders and key figures in Muslim communities and ‘risk areas’ [risicogebieden] to report, recognise and intervene in radicalisation. These actors are considered important partners and are seen as carrying a specific responsibility in combatting radicalisation. For example, the *Counter-terrorism on a Local Level Guide* states:

Parents, imams, mosques, Islamic organisations and many other involved parties have a great responsibility when it comes to identifying and combating
radicalisation and recruitment as early as possible. (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding 2006, pp. 67–68)

Besides these activities to stimulate local partners to participate in the intelligence approach, the police, national intelligence services and other organisations are focused on detecting potential Islamic extremists and terrorists in migration processes. For example, the Integral Approach Terrorism of 2017 states:

As indicated in several DTNs [Threat Assessment for Terrorism in the Netherlands] there is a possibility that individuals associated with terrorist organisations will come to Europe via the refugee flow and apply for asylum. Thus, for some time, investments have therefore been made in the entire consular and migration process [vreemdelingenketen] to identify and report signs of radicalisation, recruitment or jihadist intentions. In this context, the group of illegally residing aliens, who are often less visible due to the lack of residence rights in the Netherlands, is important. In the coming period, we will look at opportunities to strengthen cooperation and information sharing and to increase awareness among partners who deal with this target group (also outside supervision and reception). (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal 2017, pp. 5–6)

Another part of the intelligence approach is the effort to counter extremist narratives. This effort is emphasised in approaches to counter Islamic radicalisation and extremism. Interventions to counter Islamic extremist narratives follow two tracks: (1) encouraging a wide range of (non-extremist) interpretations of Islam via media, education, the internet and key figures in Muslim communities and (2) disrupting extremist narratives spread online and through key figures in Muslim communities. The second track is mainly the responsibility of police and intelligence teams, such as the Internet Referral Unit of the police, which is tasked with tracking, requesting to remove, and informing public prosecution of potentially illegal content on the Internet.

Radicalisation, suspicion and race

Different frames emerge depending on the type of extremism and radicalisation being discussed in counter-radicalisation policy documents. Left-wing extremism is not regarded as a fundamental threat and is rarely discussed. Animal rights extremism is framed as an incidental threat with specific targets, one that is seemingly more predictable and knowable: not just in its targets but also in the logic behind it. Right-wing extremism is framed as a concern for social cohesion and public order but not as a substantial terrorist threat. Most important for the question of racialisation, in contrast to Islamic radicalisation and extremism, none of these forms of radicalisation and extremism are linked to specified groups, peoples or communities, besides a focus on younger people. This was confirmed by the interviewees. Several respondents were critical of the difference in attention paid to specific groups, though they also noted the underlying dilemma faced by counter-radicalisation policymakers: the importance of being general from a constitutional perspective and simultaneously
specific to particular groups in responding to current developments. Moreover, one respondent noted an increase in attention on right-wing extremism in recent years, stating that in 2020, the approach to this type of extremism was on a level comparable to the approach to Islamic extremism in 2011. Whereas policy documents frame right-wing extremism as an issue involving lone-wolf actors, a respondent noted that professionals have long been struggling with students’ statements that prompt teachers to suspect right-wing extremism, suggesting suspicions about broader trends rather than lone-wolf actions. Respondents also noted that counter-radicalisation policies are often substantially influenced by current events and the dominant perspectives of parliament members. For example, one interviewee mentioned that measures such as taking away someone’s citizenship were mostly due to a leading political party’s desire to show they were tough rather than to careful and effective policymaking. However, political and public attention on extremism in response to COVID-19 measures did not lead to a new counter-radicalisation policy focus or action plans in 2020.

Returning to the overall frame in policy documents, Islamic extremism is framed as a potential substantial threat for national security and, like all other forms of extremism, a concern for social order/cohesion. Moreover, explicit reference is made to potential Islamic extremists making themselves undetectable, which serves as a reason for focusing on intelligence gathering. One respondent highlighted the difference in how Islamic versus other types of extremism are seen in intelligence gathering. While discussing the difference between activism and extremism, the interviewee referred to recent protests by farmers in the Netherlands against government measures. During these protests, one of the farmers drove his tractor into a county house, which the interviewee stated was basically a form of extremism. The respondent went on to say that the government keeps an eye on the farmers’ movement but not in the sense of eavesdropping on the farmers. The explicit denial of using that type of intelligence gathering for this group stands in contrast to accounts of intelligence approaches for Islamic extremism, where no exceptions are specified.

Additionally, Islamic radicalisation and extremism are regularly linked to foreign fighters, migrants and refugees and international developments in ‘the Arab world’, which produces a frame of ‘foreignness’. This was seen in the interviews. One respondent argued that the ‘in essence, friendly and moderate Moroccan Islam’ present in the Netherlands was transformed into a relatively orthodox, Salafist—in other words, ‘non-Moroccan in timbre’—type of Islam through financial and other types of involvement of foreign agents. By extension, not just returning foreign terrorist fighters, but also Muslims suspected of being susceptible to radicalisation are alluded to as an alien presence within society. To employ Medovoi’s words: ‘internal to the population, we might say, yet not of the nation’ (2012, p. 66). This is evident in counter-radicalisation policies, which distinguish between Muslims who may be(come) radicals and Muslims who have ‘shown themselves to be opponents of violence and intolerance’ (NCTV 2006, pp. 67–68). The latter are encouraged to denounce extremism and aid in countering radicalisation.

The distinguishing between ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Muslims (Mamdani 2005) in Dutch counter-radicalisation policies suggests an underlying logic of associating all Muslims with terrorism. One of the respondents illustrated this in their description
of how Muslim counter-radicalisation professionals are regarded. On the one hand, these professionals are often put on a pedestal, with the thought that ‘you’ll understand how radicals work, because you are Muslim’, which automatically assigns them certain skills they may or may not have. On the other hand, because they are Muslim, their objectivity and their loyalty to the government and its policies are questioned.

This underlying logic indicates that every Muslim is presumed to be ‘bad’ unless proven to be ‘good’, pushing Muslims to ‘prove their credentials by joining in a war against “bad Muslims”’ (Mamdani 2005, p. 15). In this framework, Muslims are cast both as potential terrorist threats and as co-producers of public safety (Nguyen 2019). As Volpp notes, this discourse of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ members is not produced in response to, for example, so-called white shooters, because they are framed as ‘individual deviants’ or ‘bad actors’ (2002, p. 1585). This disparity was also recognised and criticised by several of the respondents, one of whom stated that it would be interesting if society started to regard left- and right-wing extremism as a problem of white people to be solved by white people. At the same time, respondents considered the potential threat posed by Islamic extremism, or at least the attention paid to it in politics and media, substantial enough to justify a focus on finding circles of influence in Muslim communities. The idea that communities can be approached in order to counter radicalisation is something that was only mentioned in relation to Islamic extremism—in both the policy documents and the interviews.

This brings me to my analysis of racialisation. The counter-radicalisation policy documents I studied construct Muslims as communities rather than as individuals. Moreover, the connections these documents make between Muslims and Islamic radicalisation and extremism, which are regarded as substantial risks of danger, between Muslims and developments in foreign countries and regions and between Muslims and discussions about topics such as homosexuality, the emancipation of women and visibly showing one’s religious beliefs underwrite the stereotype of ‘the Muslim’ as dangerous, foreign and different that is found in most anti-Muslim discourses across Europe today (Lauwers 2019). The interviews supported this observation. Respondents were critical of discourses regarding Muslims in counter-radicalisation policies. One respondent observed that radicalisation is often ‘easy’ for counter-radicalisation professionals in the sense that it is always about the Other: the target group, the ‘Muslims’. To disrupt this pattern, the respondent focused on questioning counter-radicalisation professionals about their own role in the process. Another interviewee stated that the way in which the government has reacted to Islam over the past 15 years definitely did not contribute to countering radicalisation. Nevertheless, this interviewee also claimed that ‘we’ with ‘our secular thinking’ can barely understand the religious motivation of Islamic extremists, which, according to the respondent, is one of the factors that should be taken into consideration when analysing that type of radicalisation. In short, counter-radicalisation policy documents contribute to the construction of Muslims as Other.

This article illustrates how counter-radicalisation policies construct Muslims as suspicious and push them to prove themselves as ‘good’ citizens by cooperating in the fight against radicalisation. In order to qualify as a manifestation of racialisation as used in this paper, being seen as a member of ‘the Muslim group’ needs to
coincide with essentialised and generalised ideas about biological, religious or cultural differences. In the case of counter-radicalisation, policies should indicate that *even if* Muslims are proven innocent, ‘the proof is never enough; their allegiance is, at best, irredeemably split and, at worst, cover for something far more sinister’ (Fekete 2004, p. 23). My analysis presents a nuanced answer to the question if this is the case. There is evidence for racialisation, as well as for conscious efforts to prevent this. On the one hand, policy documents clarify that the vast majority of Muslims are against violence and intolerance. And the way they are formulated seems to accept that most Muslims are to be trusted. However, the apparent need to communicate this suggests that Muslims are racialised. Moreover, two policy documents explicitly refer to the ability of Islamic radicals/extremists to deceive, especially when they are further along in the process of radicalisation (Spee and Reitsma, n.d., pp. 11–12; ‘Zorg dat je erbij hoort!’ 2007, p. 49).

The effort to counter the generalisation and stereotyping of Muslims by emphasising the trustworthiness of most Muslims is commendable. However, it is part of a framework that constructs Muslims as a group that contains ‘good’/not dangerous and ‘bad’/potentially dangerous members rather than as individuals with as complex and diverse characteristics and ties as anyone else. This framework in Dutch counter-radicalisation policy documents contains incidences of racialised Muslim group membership despite efforts to prevent such an effect.

**Conclusion**

This paper investigated the presence of racialisation in Dutch counter-radicalisation policies. The analysis shows that Dutch counter-radicalisation policies securitise Muslims, constructing them as potentially risky/at risk and as alien or ‘Other’ communities within the state. Using a theoretical framework that takes racialisation to be a particular essentialised construction of group membership, the analysis presents a nuanced answer to the question if this is the case. There is evidence for racialisation, as well as for conscious efforts to prevent this. Both counter-radicalisation policy documents and professionals convey awareness of the idea that policies may securitise and discriminate against (those seen as) Muslims. There is an underlying ambition to uphold the principle of equal treatment and simultaneously take context-specific factors into account. This awareness and ambition are at odds with a framework that contains incidences of racialised Muslim group membership.

Hence, the insights gained from this study require a reconsideration of the framework of approaching Muslims as co-producers of national security in the effort to counter radicalisation and terrorism. Just as the policies do not address people who identify with right-wing viewpoints in regard to the actions of right-wing radical or extremist individuals, they should not turn to people who (are thought to) identify with Islam in regard to the actions of Islamic radical or extremist individuals. Because an increase in political attention on right-wing and anti-government extremism did not seem to co-occur with a decrease in the focus on (those considered to be) Muslims, radicalisation strategies continue to require a more careful consideration of which individuals and groups should fall within their security/
securitising framework. Future research on counter-radicalisation policymaking processes and translations from policy frameworks to local practices may give helpful insights for this reconsideration, potentially offering indicators for preventing or reducing racialisation.

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