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Co-constructing ‘the’ *Ummah*:
The mutual relations of (populist) far right and islamist politics

Abstract

This article explores populist-oriented far right and islamist discourse through a relational lens to examine how the category of ‘the’ people, specifically the *umma*, is co-constituted. In focusing on the islamist category of ‘the’ *umma*, the article examines how far right and islamist discourses work together to co-construct an antagonistic frontier. Rather than categorising distinct party families, a relational lens is employed to render visible how both islamist and far right discourses invest in an antagonistic ‘*umma*’, or Muslim collective. Through a case study of far right (Party for Freedom) and islamist (Hizb ut-Tahrir) discourses that aim towards separating the Muslim from the secular and liberal Self/Other, the article examines the *mutual* grounding of an antagonistic frontier. Adhering to the primacy of antagonism in political identification, the article demonstrates a populist conception of ‘the’ *umma* is activated and mobilised by both nationalist and islamist forms of articulation. In doing so, the article contributes to the conception and empirical discussion on prevalent forms of radical (and extremist) politics.

Keywords; islamism, nationalism, populism, discourse, *umma*

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Introduction

The key terms addressed in this article, populism and islamism, are highly contested. We are working with a definition of populism that considers it as a political logic of articulation wherein the Other is constitutive of a multitude of heterogeneous struggles and demands, and the central or master signifier to create and mobilise an antagonistic conflict. Moreover, populism is used to label and describe a variety, some of which contradictory, political discourses, movements and parties (de Cleen et al. 2021). The conflation and loose use of the term lies with populism's close connection to other forms of antagonistic conflicts characterised by an Other, such as in exclusive forms of nationalism, xenophobia, or even Islamophobia (de Groot Heupner 2022). In this article, we use populism to examine a specific dimension within far right and islamist politics that is preoccupied with the figure of the Muslim as an irreconcilable Self/Other. Populism, in the way we use it here, is distinct in constructing 'links' between different, sometimes contradictory, struggles (de Cleen et al. 2020, 163), which is why it is sometimes referred to as a 'thin' ideology (e.g., Mudde 2014). These separate struggles are combined *through* the central position of the Other that serves to construct/sediment/strengthen an antagonism between 'the common people' and 'the elite'. This anti-elitism, combined with the central position of the Other, is what distinguishes populism from other forms of antagonisms, and is the definition we are using in this article.

Drawing on conceptions of identification and hegemonisation that privileges the contingent and open-ended nature of political discourses, empirical focus is on the entanglement of inseparable yet distinct, and complementary yet opposed, meaning contents (e.g., Howarth et al. 2000; Laclau & Mouffe 1985; Marttila 2019; Stavrakakis 2017). It is this contingency that is foregrounding a discursive conception of populism that we consider useful in studying prevalent forms of far right and islamist politics. What becomes central through the lens of contingency is the successful effort mobilise a diverse spectrum of people, some of whom with competing sociopolitical interests, through a shared vertical and horizontal opposition. It is the process of subsuming different political meaning-contents (e.g., grievances, demands, ideals, fantasies) under a 'fixed' collective identification (e.g., 'the' people) that can take *any* form—where 'the' people can become 'a signifier without a signified' - that acts as the mobilising force of populism (de Cleen et al. 2021, 172).

Islamism is another highly contested term that became more widely employed, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, in reference to the use of Islam in furtherance of an Islam-based political agenda. Islam and islamism are not the same thing, however. The former refers to a major world religion, while the latter is an ideology that borrows from the religion

of Islam for its legitimacy (Tibi 2012). Tibi defines islamism as "religionized politics" that "employs religious symbols for political ends" (Tibi 2012, vii). Mozaffari (2007) contends that Islamism selectively uses the teachings of Islam to form the sets of ideas that comprise the ideology, which it reproduces as legitimate religious obligations. *Islamists* are Muslims who engage in political action "to implement what they regard as an Islamic agenda", while the content of that agenda and its pursuit is *Islamism* (Piscatori in Martin and Barzegar 2010, 27). Tibi (2012) identifies two broad groups of islamists - jihadist islamists, who use violence in pursuit of their political agenda, and institutional islamists, who adhere to electoral political procedures. However, a fixation on the Islamic legal tradition or what Tibi (2012) refers to as the shari'itization of Islam tends to be a feature of the governance and social order envisioned by both groups. Hizb ut-Tahrir, the transnational islamist group studied here, falls somewhere in between these broad groups. It does not use violence in pursuit of its political agenda, nor does it accept democratic procedures of governance. Like both jihadists and institutional islamists, Hizb ut-Tahrir projects a sharia-oriented understanding and vision of Islam based on the transfer of ideas from Muslim political theory, that developed in the centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, into the modern, post-colonial political context.

Both the fragmentation and conflation of different forms of politics of 'the' people has concealed the mutual relation between contesting populisms. With some scholars focusing on the aspect of exclusion (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak et al. 2013), others are more curious what populism can tell us about the nature of conflict in democratic societies (e.g. Devenney et al. 2016; Marchart 2018; de Cleen et al. 2021). Disregarding the *mutual* aspect of different modes of populist articulation is a missed opportunity to render visible the shared investments in constructing and diversifying (i.e., strengthening) an antagonistic frontier. Hence our focus on the modern far right and islamism as useful categories to explore how a closed and narrow conception of the *ummah* (understood as the global Muslim collective)¹ is constructed through a focus on both 'horizontal' (between in-and out-groups) and 'vertical' (between the powerless and powerful) cleavages (de Cleen 2017). These far right and islamist actors include violent extremists like Anders Breivik and Brenton Tarrant through to non-violent political actors like Fraser Anning in Australia, Marine Le Penn in France, Gerald Batten in the UK, and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands. Among islamists, there are violent extremists such as the leaders and supporters of groups such as Al Qaeda, Daesh (also known

¹ As both a Qur'anic and historical term, we recognise the *ummah* has meant different things in different times and has not always been limited to include Muslims only (see later discussion in this article).

as Islamic State or ISIS) and the Taliban through to non-violent political actors such as those affiliated with the PAS in Malaysia, PJD in Morocco, and Ennahda in Tunisia.²

Our purpose in this article is to examine the so-called 'sliding' of the signifier of 'the' *ummah* so it comes to mean similar things in far right and islamist politics. In doing so, the article is rendering visible the shared investment of far right and islamist in 'the' *ummah* as a vertical and horizontal antagonism. Being less occupied with the frontier itself (and thereby risking the potential of sustaining it) that divides far right and islamist politics, the article contributes to the scholarship that is attempting to provide a better understanding of the *success* of far right and islamist politics (vis-à-vis the relatively low success of left populisms, for example). The key contribution of the article is found in the exploration of diverging but connecting political ideologies through a shared investment in a Muslim antagonist, made possible because of a vertical opposition to hegemonic power. In doing so, it shows how an anti-pluralist conception of 'the' *ummah* is not only upheld by islamists but *co-constructed* by islamists and far right politics alike.³

Our analysis is based on two case subjects that share in common a political logic of otherising and polarising 'the' Muslim, namely Hizb ut-Tahrir—a transnational islamist party—and the Party for Freedom—a Dutch far right anti-Islam party that has been influential in constructing a globalised/transnational post-9/11 anti-Islam discourse/politics. We select these case subject because our position is that, in a post-9/11 context, these parties represent a phase of changing horizons of what is discursively possible. Moreover, even though they are mutually exclusive in terms of ideology, which is why they are often studied in separation from one another, they are mutually inclusive in the way they are 'operating in conjunction' to create an ideational and political division between Muslims and non-Muslims. We elicit data from foundational writings that define both parties situated within a temporal-spatial context that is defined by the global securisation of Muslims.

² We acknowledge manifestations of far right and islamist politics vary across different political contexts and power imbalances are such that islamists have less political influence in countries of the West than in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, and vice versa for far right discourses, movements, and parties across Muslim-majority contexts. Despite these important considerations regarding inequalities of political power, we presuppose a cross-border connection that allows far right and islamist actors to practice a closed and anti-pluralist conception of 'the' *ummah* across spatial contexts.

³ We should note here not all forms of islamist politics aims towards constructing an *ummah*. For example, Tunisia's islamist movement Ennahdha operates to reclaim Tunisia's Arab-Islamic identity (McCarthy 2015) and is therefore best considered nationalist in orientation.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we shall discuss the theoretical and normative distinctions between populist, nationalist and islamist discourses. In the following section, we shall explore the relational aspect of far right and islamist politics in abstracting the mutual construction of a closed and non/anti-pluralist *ummah*. It is for this reason we focus on the populist dimension (even though we acknowledge it is not the foremost dimension) since it is our understanding it is what makes the relational and mutual aspect of far right and islamist politics most observable. Hence also the importance the discuss the various denominations that, we recognise, are not limited to describe the different manifestations of modern forms of far right and islamist politics (for example, racism and fascism are also pertinent denominations) but are considered effective and useful to single out the shared investments in a Muslim Other. In the final section, we shall explore the affective dimension which constitutes, according to a discourse-theoretical approach, the mobilising power of discourse (i.e., which makes people adhere to discourse) by examining the distinct and inseparable role of the Other.

Populism, nationalism, and islamism

There is an emerging body of literature on the concept of islamist populism.⁴ Hadiz (2014, 2016, 2018) uses 'Islamic populism' with reference to political movements in Muslim-majority contexts that are part of the broader phenomenon of populism that have developed in response to the 'contradictions of globalised capitalism' and post-Cold war 'social conflicts' and 'social-structural transformations' (Hadiz 2014, 125). In his conception termed 'New Islamic Populism', the *ummah* is conceived as "downtrodden" and "homogenous" though in reality differentiated by socio-economic class (Hadiz 2014, 125). This form of 'Islamic' populism is represented by 'cross-class coalitions' that encompass an ambitious yet frustrated 'urban middle class', an anxious 'urban poor', and 'relatively peripheralised sections of the bourgeoisie' (Hadiz 2014, 125). In his examination of Islamic populism in Indonesia, Vedi Hadiz (2018, 566) highlights its anti-Communist roots that manifest in 'disdain for Leftist challenges to private property and capital accumulation'. Although this movement has embraced democratic processes and de-emphasised the establishment of a *shariah*-based state,

⁴ Please note islamism is almost always capitalized. We decided not to capitalize 'islamism' to privilege its political dimension similar to other ideologies such as 'communism' and 'liberalism'. In doing so, we are not dismissing certain Islamic aspects that are foundational to different islamist ideologies and manifestations, but to be consistent regarding the use of the term vis-à-vis other similar concepts.

cultural idiom associated with “Islam” are reinforced to mobilise public support in ‘contests over power and resources based on an ummah-based political identity’ (Hadiz 2018, 566).

Similar to extremist far right discourses disseminated by actors such as Anders Breivik that cannot be understood in isolation from the political context and discourses concerning immigration, multiculturalism, Islam and Muslims that had been circulating in Norway since the 1980s (Bangstad 2016), islamist discourses, whether populist or not, are best understood in relation to the political contexts in which they thrive. Most spatial contexts wherein islamist discourses thrive, such as the MENA region, have been subject to colonial and imperial historical experiences that positioned Muslims on the peripheries of politics. In using the example of Norway, even though political discourses about Islam and Muslims posing an ‘existential threat to Norway and Norwegians’ did not directly incite violence, it ‘certainly advanced ideas about Muslims and Islam which are of extreme right-wing provenance and are taken by some extreme right-wingers to offer tacit support for their cause’ (Bangstad 2019, 231). Similarly, islamist actors consider themselves an oppositional force to counter ‘progressive’ ideas about Muslims and Islam that are in agreement with democratic and pluralist values and principles. So although the political context of place where far right and islamist actors prosper differs, there is a ‘co-constitutive practice of ideal places’ that appeals to the imagination of a diverse group of activists, recruits, and voters (de Groot Heupner & Sinclair 2022, 3). Identification with an ideal state—one where there is no Muslim subject (far right ideal) or where the Muslim subject defines the political spatiotemporal coordinates (islamist ideal)—is what connects different places through the act of negating (or essentialising) the Muslim (de Groot Heupner & Sinclair 2022).

The concept of islamist populism is used by Ihsan Yilmaz (2018) to describe the political transformation of Turkey under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). According to this conception, the AKP has replaced Kemalism as a unifying national ideology with ‘an Islamist nation-building and social-engineering project’ (Yilmaz 2018, 52), focused in particular on educational institutions. Key “islamist” elements of this populism include ‘neo-Ottomanism, conservatism, and growing pious generations’ (Yilmaz 2018, 54). Yilmaz emphasises the charismatic leadership of President Erdôgan is central to the AKP’s islamist populism, particularly his voice for the interests of the “real people” against those of the “old elites”. Other studies have identified the phenomenon of populism among Turkey’s AKP and Morocco’s Justice and Development Party (PJD). Kirdis and Drhimeur (2016, 599) argue that these “incumbent” pro-Islamic parties have ‘evolved into populist parties’ to consolidate their ‘electoral appeal among diverse constituents’ and have taken positions as representatives of the

marginalised against the elite through political reforms aimed at ‘bringing the will of the majority into power’.

Given that populism, whether in the far right of islamist context, is often conflated with antagonistic forms of identification, it seems important to begin our exploration of the Muslim Other with the question whether populism is the most appropriate concept to explain it. Following a recent intervention of Benjamin de Cleen *et al.* (2021), we must be mindful not to exaggerate the significance of populism versus other politico-discursive systems, such as nationalism and racism, that likewise depend on an antagonistic Other. Moreover, scholars examining left populism, such as Chantal Mouffe (2018), argue populist discourse should not be problematised as it disregards its corrective and democratic potential. Such problematisation can also attribute to the conflation of nationalism and populism, for example, which often leads to nationalist elements being downplayed (de Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). In the instance of islamism, however, the reverse seems to be the case, with the privilege of islamist (or sometimes conflated as Islamic) tenets over populist logics of identification. Because neither of these denominations are either/or realities, we consider it useful to touch on the theoretical and empirical relation between populist, islamist, and nationalist constellations. In the modern context, each of these constellations (i.e., the structure of meaning-contents) are occupied with constructing a Muslim Other through the concept of 'the' people or 'the' *ummah*. Although there are other political discourses that do the same (such as modern racism), we consider these constellations relevant and useful because of a shared frontier that positions 'the' people 'in the place of power' (Heiskanen 2020, 2). Although the equivalent relation that ties together different (and opposing) interests, grievances, demands, and experiences is different in a predominant nationalist or islamist constellation, there is a similar objective of reconfiguring relations of power that brings 'the' people (whoever 'they' might be) 'back' to the forefront. In the aforementioned context of Turkey and Morocco, for example, it is argued that islamist populism has emerged among incumbents in an attempt to retain and consolidate power (Kirdis & Drhimeur 2016).

In acknowledging 'the' people in nationalist discourse constitute both 'a' people and 'a' state, the entanglement with populist discourse can be more easily understood. The nation, in the conception of Jaakko Heiskanen (2020), is ultimately intertwined with the state. Such an entanglement is visible in nationalist-oriented forms of islamist politics where the signifier of ‘the’ *ummah*, representing the global Muslim collective, is dependent on the political institution of the caliphate—the ideal Sunni Islamic state. In other words, ‘the’ *ummah*—as a specific social bond—becomes the central signifier to legitimise the establishment of the caliphate. One

might differentiate between a nationalist-and a populist-oriented islamist project on the basis that the former is less occupied with the formation of a caliphate through an essentialist conception of the *ummah*, whereas the latter is motivated by constructing an Other to legitimise a homeland for *all* Muslims. However, a third position can be considered—nationalist islamist populism—in the Muslim-majority contexts such as Turkey, Indonesia and Morocco, where islamist/islamic-oriented parties are already in power (Turkey and Morocco) or have significant political influence (Indonesia) (see for example, Hadiz 2018; Yilmaz 2016; Kirdis & Drhimeur 2016), and nationalist ambitions are more prominent.

In cases where islamist populism is nationalist, the caliphate challenges nationalist interests and threatens nation-state sovereignty, while the *ummah*'s relevance is largely confined to intra-Muslim discourses and domestic political rhetoric on international issues of concern. Palestinian human rights and self-determination is a case in point.⁵ Moreover, while the concept of the *ummah* is well established in the Qur'ān as a reference to people and nations, the concept of caliphate is not as well founded. The Qur'ān does not use the word caliphate/*khilafah* and caliph is not used in reference to a political ruler but to human beings in general as *inheritors* of or *successors* on the earth (see Q2:30; Q6:165; Q27:62; and Q35:39). The term 'caliph' took on a political connotation and came to be used as the title of Muslim rulers decades after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in the mid to late Umayyad period (Donner 2012). In contrast with nationalist islamist populism, the caliphate and the *ummah* are relevant for populist islamist groups that do not possess political power. Such populist islamists as Hizb ut-Tahrir must leverage potentially mobilising concepts as caliphate and *ummah*, based on their later meanings, in the hope of creating an alternative political order in which they may have an opportunity to attain power. It is this type of populist islamism with which our article is concerned and on which the following will focus.

The ongoing conflict in Palestine exemplifies the distinction between a nationalist or populist-oriented people. Palestine is the empty signifier in the populist-oriented islamist discourse, such as articulated by the transnational Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party for Liberation), to distinguish the national islamist project, as embodied by Hamas for example, from the populist islamist project. As a symbol, the Palestinian flag symbolises the distinction between the *ummah* as a national, transnational or cross-national entity, and 'the' *ummah* (as a populist construct) as the transcendental nation (a nation beyond nations). Through a populist logic,

⁵ In a recent telephone conversation with Turkish President Erdogan, the Iranian President Rouhani is reported to have named 'Palestine as the most important common issue of the Islamic *ummah*' (MEHR News Agency, 16 May 2021).

Hizb ut-Tahrir is able to link together different interests, experiences, demands, and subjects (to define 'the' *ummah*) through the condemnation of Palestine's *national* aspiration. According to the populist logic of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Palestine's objective of establishing a national state undermines the antagonistic relation with the West (because it absorbs national aspirations) and thereby erodes the foundation of 'the' *ummah* (it is after all dependent on the negation with the Other). Therefore, the conflict in Palestine, from the position of Hizb ut-Tahrir, can only be resolved if the concept of *ummah* is antagonistically defined, hence the hostility towards Arab and Muslim-majority states, such as Egypt and Morocco, that are deemed to be embedded within the *kufir* system of the West. From the populist articulation of Hizb ut-Tahrir, the conflict in Palestine can only be resolved by constructing an antagonistic frontier with the West (May 19, 2021). The *name* of Palestine acts to differentiate from other (nationalist) islamist mobilisations to construct a dichotomous frontier between 'our' and 'their' *ummah*.

Considering the many different interpretations and articulations of Islam, islamism similarly is best understood in the plural. Whilst the societal and civilisational aspect of Islam has always been political, modern islamisms are commonly associated with the rejection of the colonial subject and the 'Islamic solution' (*al-hall al-Islami*) of an alternative islamised state order (Tibi 2012). The common denominator of various islamisms is the re-imagination of the *ummah*, as a plural or homogeneous entity, within the context of a global community of nation-states. In the words of Fethi Benslama (2012, 38), islamist discourse is 'rarely separable from a powerful nationalist expression'. Rather than antithetical, 'the' *ummah* embodies traces of the modern nation-state and is arguably hegemonic rather than counter-hegemonic in conception. In that sense, islamist reactionary discourse derives from the same fanatic obsession as nationalist reactionary discourse. Islamist discourse follows the same sacralisation of the nation that is foundational to hegemonic forms of politics (Benslama 2009).

Arguably, the *naming* of islamism limits our understanding of the roots of different forms of islamist politics, ranging from democratic, authoritarian and militant, not to mention the varying normative distinctions (e.g. Wahhabism). In naming islamism, observers are confined to the domain of religion, and disregard what Benslama (2012) acknowledges as a blend of theology, the paradigm of science, and populism. Since the end of the Ottoman Empire (1924), islamist articulation is constructed around the notion of loss, or what Benslama (2009) regards the mourning of the past ideal of the caliphate. Contrary to most observations, then, the objective of the caliphate does not signify a 'return to something [...] but a *delusional appeal to origin*' (Beslama 2009). The antagonist—the hegemonic order of the West—is condemned

not for the ontic demise of the caliphate (as is often argued) but for the ontological deprivation of a 'state' of origin.

Populist islamist discourse constructs a vertical opposition between the oppressor - the imperial elite—and the oppressed—the *authentic* Muslim. The horizontal relation defines the peripheries of the Muslim subject; who belongs and who does not. Progressive Muslims, for example, are often classified as an out-group, though are not necessarily considered an antagonistic other. Instead, they occupy the position of opponent to the ideal social order that demands an alliance with 'the' ummah as an antagonistic force vis-à-vis the global hegemonic order. The logic through which islamist demands are articulated are often understood in material and historical terms, and is missing the conceptual and theoretical depth that populist politics is receiving. Considering the relevance of equivalent and differential signification, the populism prism can be useful in deepening our understanding of the roots of islamist politics, and its relation to other forms of extremist politics, such as the far right. Through the singular name 'islamism' (in contrast with the plural 'islamisms') the heterogeneous forms of islamist politics, notwithstanding the different theological interpretation run the risk of being crystallised in one collective will (Laclau 2005a). We can see that, for instance, in the misrecognition of different discursive constructions of islamism, some of which are more directed towards constructing a global or local *ummah*, and others, such as Daesh, towards mobilising an antagonism to legitimise a counter-hegemonic order under the guise of a particular (a-historical) vision of the caliphate.

Although impossible to equate the national subject of nationalism to the national subject of islamism, there is an important similarity between the populist variants of nationalist and islamist discourses. In both structures (or logic) of identification, discourse revolves around an 'absent fullness'; there is a *lack* in society that needs to be filled with an object of meaning (Laclau 2005a, 48). Rather than an "mere" outsider (which would define a nationalist-oriented discourse), the subject of "the" Muslim is the (ontological) object of lack; of a fullness that cannot be reached. Whereas in other forms of islamism, such as political-Salafism, a particular theological interpretation is more prominent, a populist structure of identification points to the absent fullness of society by 'using' the object of the Muslim as a 'means of representation' (Laclau 2005a, 48). In other words, the Muslim becomes the object to represent the illusion of a social fullness (of a complete identity) made possible through a plethora of signifiers that (affectively) signify notions of lack (or projected discontents). In constructing a Muslim subject beyond theological and national divides (consider Hamas for example), to name but two

cleavages, populist islamist discourse is well situated within the discursive terrain of populist nationalist politics.

De Cleen (2017) has argued that, despite the theoretical and empirical overlap, there is an important distinction between the national and populist subject. As de Cleen (2017) establishes, the populist subject is vertically articulated (top/down), whereas the nationalist subject is horizontally articulated (in/out). While there is such a distinction between both discourses, the national subject is a dominant reference point for prevalent forms of so-called inclusionary and exclusionary populist politics (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013). That is hardly surprising given the primacy of the nation-state and the concept of the nation in modern democratic politics (people as nation instead of people as demos). But the predominance of nationalist elements in populist discourse does not imply a logical coherence between the two; contrary to observers such as Rogers Brubaker (2020) populist politics can be imagined beyond the concept of the nation. In the same vein as nationalism, perhaps populism is best understood as a banal instead of a transformative feature of modern society, as the force of interrogation of society's practices of *origin* (Marchart 2007; Paipais 2020).

In a similar way to nationalism, populist islamism is dependent on a constitutive outside to define the limits of the nation. Paradoxically, in its very antithesis to nationalism, populist islamism is the inseparable side of the same object. In populist islamist politics, the nation *is* the *ummah*, in the same way the nation is the transcendental signifier in the 'empty' constitution of 'the' people in nationalist politics. The political category of the *ummah* and 'the' people represent a particular signification of the sovereign community of the nation. But in the same way the lack of conceptual distinction has given populism a bad name, the same is evident for islamism. Islamism is widely considered a reactionary discourse to modernity on the basis of its opposition with progressive and liberal values. By integrating a populist logic, however, islamism is constructing a national discourse *through* an articulation of struggles of subordination (which constitutes an up/down relation).

So what makes nationalism and islamism populist? And why is such a denomination important? The in/out relation that characterises islamism and prevalent forms of nationalism does not account for the legitimation of a common threat, which gains legitimacy because of the vertical relation of power. In other words, a reconfiguration of power is necessary to give means to the possibility of the 'righteous self' and impossibility of the 'fictitious other' (Eklundh 2021). For example, the (im)possibility of the Muslim subject is vertically directed towards the dynamics of power, or more precisely, the suppression of the righteous self. Moments of rupture (that upset the discursive arrangements of society), such as the current

Covid pandemic, provide the experience of the constitutive '*broken space*' of society (Laclau 2005a, 85). The experience of *lack* opens up the possibility of producing (as demands do not exist *a priori*) and linking demands (Marchart 2018). The populist possibility is what Marchart (2018, 116) regards the 'moment of protest' directed towards the constitutive outside (the Muslim other) by virtue of the discontent with the configuration of power.

Constructing 'the' ummah

The word *ummah* is an Arabic term that is used over sixty times in the Qur'ān to mean a nation or a people that share a common ancestry, geography, religion or way of life. In common usage among Muslims today, *ummah* is generally a reference to the international community of Muslims. However, it is used more broadly in the Qur'ān in reference to collectivities of people in general (e.g. Q2:214; Q7:35; Q10:48; Q15:6; Q23:44; Q45:29) and not necessarily the community or followers of Muhammad. The term *ummah* is also used in the Constitution of Medina, a document prepared by Muhammad in 622 following his migration from Mecca to Medina, in reference to the city's Muslim and non-Muslim residents. Among the many scholarly writings on the concept of *ummah* are those that examine its use in early Islam (Denny 1975, 1977), modern relationship with Islam and nationalism (al-Ahsan 1986, 1992), revised interpretations in response to globalisation (Roy 2004; Hassan 2006), and in relation to contemporary information technology and political Islam (Mandaville 2013).

In populist and nationalist variations of islamism, 'the' *ummah*—as a negative, closed (antagonistic) identifier—has taken the position of 'the' people as articulated by far right (populist) parties, activists and movements. As the antithesis of the essentialist 'people' in far right politics, 'the' *ummah* has become the signifier to communicate the 'pure' Islamic message to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The anti-establishment message is linked horizontally, or equivalentially in discourse-theoretical terms, to the antagonistic conception of the people (i.e. 'the' people) (Mietzner 2021). Paradoxically, such ideological self-classification ascribes a primordial character to 'the' *ummah*. As is evident from the writings of Hizb ut-Tahrir's al-Nabhani, it is the ideological bond that distinguishes Muslims from non-Muslims on an intellectual and rational level. In other words, the affective bond, inscribed in political movements that are solely based on (negative) emotions for example, is superficial and unnatural, whereas the ideological bond is instinctive and pure. It is the ideological state of being that is the state of truth, which arises from deep reflection and deliberation on the state of nature and spirit. Hizb ut-Tahrir proclaims that such deep reflection and deliberation

inevitably leads to the recognition that Islam is political in nature, and abiding by such truth is what is mobilising Muslims towards the politicisation of Islam through the concept of *da'wah*—the activity of (re-)introducing people to Islam. As the practice of calling people to the *'aqeedah*—the creed of Islam—*da'wah*, from the position of Hizb ut-Tahrir, is a political act to engender an ideological bond between people.

The religious, or spiritual, bond can be considered a particular affective bond dependent on superficial concepts. As an ideology, the *'aqeedah* unites the community of true believers, and only through that collectivity can a truly authentic social bond come into being (Hizb ut-Tahrir 1989, 15). Contrary to the genuine kinship of 'the' *ummah*, the superficial and emotional bond (such as the nationalist or patriotic bond) is considered a 'great sin' and 'terrible evil' (Hizb ut-Tahrir 1989, 18). Similarly, the Party for Freedom articulates the ideological bond as the ideal type of solidarity and kinship. (Western) Enlightenment ideals are foundational to the primacy of the nation as state, and the individual as sovereign being.⁶ That is to say, in Samuel Fukuyama's terms, the ideological bond represents the 'end of history' as the final and ultimate stage of ideological invention and cultivation, and individual and social enlightenment.

As a rational and objective bond, the social bond is informed by the idea of *one* nation and *one* history. Here, the construction of 'one people' brings us to the logic of populist articulation. The articulations of 'the' *ummah* (Hizb ut-Tahrir) and 'the' people (Party for Freedom) are contingent upon the linking of differential demands, interests and affects towards a common antagonism (de Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). The aim of populist articulation is to construct 'a' people that is both differential (mobilising different demands and affects) and equivalential (subsuming such particularity under a universality, which is projected onto a common antagonism). Therefore, 'a' people is presented as homogeneous in its articulation of a universality (a shared opposition) while remaining internally differential; particularity never dissolves its own particularity. In the structure of signification of both Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Party for Freedom, the name of the Muslim occupies the position of universality - or empty signifier - linking different elements, demands and social subjects in a relation of equivalence to constitute a totality - a social (and therefore, political) identity.

As a primary point of reference, the name of 'the' Muslim functions as an empty signifier to establish a discursive system of popular solidarity - a chain of equivalence - to constitute 'a' people. From a relational perspective, the name of 'the' Muslim operates as the

⁶ Note different societies and civilisations went through an Age of Enlightenment; the 'Golden Age' of Islam from the 8th until the 13th century is considered a period of Islamic Enlightenment (Baggini 2018). There is thus not one Enlightenment as the Party for Freedom aims to sediment.

unifying element to construct an antagonism between ‘the’ people and ‘the’ elite. After all, the aim of both parties is to construct a hegemonic formation to mobilise a collectivity against the hegemonic order. Constructing such a hegemonic formation is possible because of the (im)possibility of the Muslim subject for which the hegemonic order is to blame. To illustrate, for Hizb ut-Tahrir, the multicultural project embedded in (neo)liberal and secular logic makes the revival of the Muslim subject *impossible*. Muslims are demanded to assimilate and amend their religion according to hegemonic forms of rationality. For the Party for Freedom, the multicultural project makes the revival of the Muslim subject *possible*, both within and beyond the so-called borders of modernity. On the basis of such negation, the Muslim subject can be deemed internally split between being able to realise and not being to realise her true identity. Such an internal split (or frontier) operates as a mutual investment in articulating and mobilising the Muslim as ‘the Muslim subject’, deprived of multiple and entangled identities (Jung 2019).

In negation, popular solidarity is grounded in the unsatisfied demand for the impossibility (Hizb ut-Tahrir) and possibility (Party for Freedom) of realising the Muslim subject. We can thus observe an antagonistic relation between Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Party for Freedom in shared opposition to the hegemonic world order. That is to say, popular solidarity (the chain of equivalence) is made possible because of the antagonistic relation between the figure of the Muslim and the (secular) figure of the West. The binary frontier is sustained by the mutual investment of an opposition with the institutions (such as the media, academia, government) and subject roles (such as journalists, academics, politicians) - ‘the’ elite.

To illustrate the dynamic we can likewise consider the latest cartoon debate following the killing of school teacher Samuel Paty in France in October 2020 who, during a lesson on freedom of speech, displayed a Muhammed cartoon. In a parliamentary debate on the topic of freedom of speech initiated by the Party for Freedom, the (expected) general condemnation of acts of blasphemy served to sediment the demand of (liberal) freedom. What contributed to the widespread articulation of freedom was a petition initiated by the Dutch imam Ismail Abou Soumayyah (and supported by Hizb ut-Tahrir) that called for the incrimination of offending the Prophet. Considering it was released only days after the events in France, the petition was seen to undermine the fundamental principle and value of freedom, and consequently, dislocate the social order. Hizb ut-Tahrir released a statement pressing for Muslims to oppose the ‘intolerance’ of the hegemonic order for the sake of (the liberation of) ‘the’ *ummah* (November 7, 2020). Interestingly, the petition rather than freedom of speech became the key reference point in the debate, evident from the ‘need’ of most parties to express ‘our’ (constitutional)

principle of freedom. In Hegelian terms, the petition facilitated a 'movement of self-knowing' in juxtaposition of the 'I' and the 'not-I' (Gadamer 1976, 13). The demand of the petition to place restrictions on freedom emphasised the substance of the 'I' and brought to the foreground the possible subject of the 'not-I' - the (intolerant) Muslim.

The dystopian and righteous other

Following Laclau (2005b), the analysis thus far brings us to the act of naming and its importance for the constitution - and institution - of 'the' people. According to Laclau (2005a, 2005b), the act of naming represents an affective investment; it operates as an emotional vessel of historical and subjective relations. The naming of 'the' people through the linking of differential demands and interests (the equivalential relation) are held together by affects (Mouffe 2019). While the *naming* holds together the equivalential demands, the *name* provokes a particular affective attachment. The naming of 'the' Muslim does not only facilitate the absorption of different elements (demands, interests etc.) in an equivalential chain, but also activates an affective dimension inscribed in the name itself. For Hizb ut-Tahrir, the demise of the Ottoman Empire (1924) coincides with the demise of the Muslim, with the name Muslim consisting of a longing for representation (embedded in a delusional desire for origin, with reference to the aforementioned words of Benslama). As with other islamist groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir subscribes to the idea that the creation of a Muslim polity (caliphate) is an 'Islamic' obligation, despite it being an invention of later Muslims *after* Muhammad completed the delivery of the Qur'ān and message of Islam. It is their competing visions of polity, and who (*ummah*/people) these polities are intended to represent and serve (and oppose), that is central to the antagonism between the islamists and the far right.

For heuristic purposes, separating two relations of negativity (the in/out and up/down relations) provides the tools to analyse the different affective forces necessary to constitute 'a' people. From our analysis thus far, the affective logic of the Muslim subject equals the sum of the dystopian other (in/out) and the righteous other (up/down). Following the formula of affect introduced by Emilia Palonen (2020, 121) that considers populism the sum of the 'frontier' (affect 1) and 'us' (affect 2), the righteous other can be deemed to represent the (up/down) frontier and the dystopian other 'us' (in/out) frontier. To illustrate, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Party for Freedom both invest in the figure of the hero/martyr to sediment the frontier (affect 1) with 'the' elite. Within both structures of signification, the hero/martyr acts as an affective investment in the righteous other (affect 1): without the hero/martyr opposing the hegemonic

order, selfhood will be lost. With reference to Lacanian psychoanalysis upon which the discourse-theoretical notion of affect rests, the sacrifice associated with the hero/martyr enables a necessary rupture and dislocation to sediment an “us” (affect 2) (Mura 2019). Sacrifice through martyrdom ‘allows the subject to find a unified identity’ that otherwise cannot be found; the subconscious ideal of completeness can be achieved (Mara 2019, 327).

The vertical identification with the leader is evident in the discourse on the Muhammed cartoons. Contrary to the horizontal relation of mutual identification, the vertical relation is dependent on an instinctive association with an abstract ideal (Hoens 2019). The figure of the hero, in the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Party for Freedom, represents a ‘reactionary authority’ of restoring order (McGowan 2019). The affective investment is attributed to the return to a ‘proper’ state of law and order addressing the “real” discontents of ‘the’ people (affect 1). We must acknowledge here the nuance between emotion and affect with our focus on the latter as the collective, and (partially) unconscious, emotive experience. Whereas emotions can be designated, in the politics of anger for example, affect is bound up with fantasies, desires and myths. In the words of Candida Yates (2019, 163) affective processes ‘find symbolic expression through the subject’s relationship to real and imagined others’.

The (im)possible Muslim subject can be understood as a reversal of utopian politics. In the words of Benslama (2009, 28), ‘the apotheosis has already taken place’ as there is no better future possible than the past. Wilders’ (December 11, 2021) reiteration ‘we want the Netherlands back’ denotes such a reversal of utopian politics. The ‘belief in the perfection of origin’ represents the politics of a revisited place rather than the utopian ‘non-place’ (Benslama 2009, 27). Here, Wilders seems to cohere with the Hegelian perspective of recognition where the other must return to itself, or in the words of Gadamer (1976, 64), ‘to its free existence’. In the articulation of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Party for Freedom, the (im)possible Muslim subject confirms the self *through* its own (im)possibility. It implies that which is (im)possible (i.e. the Muslim) is what activates the polarised subject. Affective attachment is thus not merely attributed to the polarised subject (affect 2) but also to the delusional wholeness of identity which ‘the’ people are deprived of thanks to ‘the’ elite (affect 1). Therefore, rather than a politics of pure homogeneity, ‘the’ *ummah* represents a demand for a coherent and complete ‘us’ (Benslama 2009).

Conclusion

Despite their important ideational differences, we have tried to render visible the shared structure (or logic) of identification of 'the' *ummah* in the discursive performances of the Party for Freedom and Hizb ut-Tahrir. Noting other writings on nationalist islamist populism observed among parties that currently possess political power (e.g., AKP in Turkey and PJD in Morocco) or groups that have significant political influence (e.g., in Indonesia), we have focused on populist islamism of such groups as Hizb ut-Tahrir that are marginal actors with little political influence. The article has proposed that populist islamism differs from nationalist-islamist populism in how it conceptualises and attempts to coopt the *ummah* for constructing a caliphate, which encourages a distinct interdependence with the far right. Rather than a political superstructure, the caliphate can be perceived as a social relation of mutually reinforcing identities. The model adopted by the islamists is derived from an era in Muslim history when the polity (caliphate) privileged Muslims over non-Muslims. In the popular imagination, non-Muslims faced an existential threat under a caliphate. When islamists today frame their goal of establishing a caliphate as an 'Islamic' obligation, they direct the fear and ire of the far right to Islam and the *ummah* more generally.

By focusing on the *co*-construction of 'the' *ummah* as an antagonistic social category, the article has aimed to contribute to current populist scholarship that is occupied with distinguishing between populist, nationalist, racist, and, to some degree, fascist, structures of discourse. We propose to consider islamism more closely within the scholarship on populism through the concept of 'the' *ummah*. It is our understanding that 'the' people of the modern far right is tied in with the 'the' *ummah* of modern forms of islamist discourses prevalent in countries of the West. Whereas less populist-oriented forms of islamism, that centralise *shariah* over 'the' people for example, oftentimes constitute a separate scholarship (in the field of Islamic Studies), we argue that groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir fit well within the populist lens in their conception and practice of 'the' *ummah* as a resistance force against the embodied elite (e.g., hegemonic institutions). We can therefore argue that, although not "pure" forms of populism, the far right and islamist groups studied here can be considered 'rival populisms' (Mietzner 2020). However, through the signifier of 'the' *ummah*, it is clear that the far right and islamist groups studied here are not only rival populisms, but also allies in how they aim to install an imagination of the *ummah* (in the broadest term) as separate and incommensurable from 'the' people of the far right. Discussions on such essentialist identifications of 'the' people/*ummah* would benefit from further engagement with the mutual, circular or dialectical

aspect of different modes of antagonistic discourses (such as populist articulations of islamism). Considering populist politics as a distinct ontological practice of the making of social relations, such interventions can provide insight into the legitimation of a populist frontier that is both horizontal (between the insider/outsider) and vertical (as an opposition to existing power relations).

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