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‘Making *Hijra*’: mobility, religion and the everyday in the lives of women converts to Islam in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Drawing on long term research – including topical life stories, interviews and participant observation – we analyze how women converts to Islam in the Netherlands signify and experience making *hijra*. Our interlocutors, all observant Muslims, had left the Netherlands between the late 1990s and the mid 2010s. In the course of the last 5 years many have again returned to the Netherlands. Their life courses indicate that physical and existential mobility are interconnected in their everyday lives as well as in their migration trajectories. Whereas they considered conversion to Islam as moving forward, the majority society did not share this perspective. They were sharply aware of how they were no longer seen as self-evidently part of the Dutch nation. This produced feelings of stuckedness - in an existential and a material sense - for themselves and their children, and hence a desire to move to a Muslim majority country. They differed amongst themselves as to whether and how they signified leaving Europe as making *hijra* in an Islamic sense. To some, making *hijra* was a highly desirable religious act. Others did not foreground such religious signification, but nonetheless expected positive effects of living in an environment where Islam would be an integral part of daily life. Their attempts to settle in various Muslim majority countries were, however, often not successful. Material conditions made it difficult to enact their ethical aspirations, that included the moral and material well-being of others, especially their children. Moreover, their appreciation of the self-evident presence of Islam in the countries of settlement was tempered, first, by the tension between their quest for a reflexive, deculturalized Islam and the culturalized practices they encountered in their new environment, and second, by their growing awareness of how their sense of self was much more shaped by habitual ‘Dutch’ conventions than most of them had envisioned beforehand. As a result they were often unable to develop meaningful social relationships in their new environment. Eventually, almost all of them returned to the Netherlands.

Keywords Converts · Islam · The everyday · Stuckedness · Hijra · Mobility · Migration

Introduction

Since the mid 2010s ‘making *hijra*’ has become strongly associated with Muslim men and women leaving Europe to emigrate to jihadi-held areas in Syria (Alloul, 2019; Navest et al., 2016; De Koning this issue). The huge attention this form of making *hijra* has drawn both in the media and in academia has overshadowed longer-existing patterns of Muslims leaving Europe to settle in Muslim majority countries. In the Netherlands, these include first generation migrants returning to their countries of origin, second generation post-migrants moving to their parents’ country of origin but also to elsewhere in the Muslim world (Alloul, 2020; Arnaut et al., 2020), and converts to Islam. Our contribution focuses on this latter category.

Making *hijra* is a floating signifier that has different meanings, depending on who employs it in which context. Whereas the Arabic term *hijra* can refer to any kind of migration, including, for instance, the migration of Christian Syrians to Latin America, for many Muslims making *hijra* also has a religious connotation (Reda, 2017). Referring to the migration of the prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, making *hijra* stands for migration from the ‘lands of disbelief’ to the ‘lands of Islam’. Islamic scholars have further debated and developed the concept of *hijra* in the course of time (Masud, 1990; see introduction to this volume). As a form of religious migration, *hijra* brings together religion and mobility.

Whereas ‘making *hijra*’ was not the initial focus of our research, we became acutely aware of this phenomenon during our long-term engagements with women converts to Islam in the Netherlands. In 2006, Vroon-Najem had started research about women’s conversion and the politics of belonging (Vroon-Najem, 2014, 2019) and from 2014 on, Moors and Vroon-Najem worked together to explore how these women entered into marriage (Moors et al., 2018; Moors & Vroon-Najem, 2019).¹ In the course of doing fieldwork, which included participant observation, informal conversations and topical life-story interviews, we came to realize that some of our interlocutors had spent considerable periods of time in a Muslim majority country, while others had gone abroad or were in the process of leaving.

As our interlocutors self-identify as observant Muslims, we were particularly interested in how mobility and religion intersected in their lives. What does ‘making *hijra*’ mean to them, how do they signify this form of mobility, what motivated them to leave Europe, and what conditions enabled them to follow through? When it became apparent, in the course of the last five years, that many of those who had emigrated earlier, returned to the Netherlands, a next set of questions emerged, centering on the motivations and conditions that impelled them to return. In other words, we had become interested in how their trajectories of mobility and immobility evolved over time, and how they signified their experience.

These questions locate our research project in the field of migration and mobilities studies as well as in that of the study of religion. In the course of the last half a century, empirical trends in migration and mobility have changed and the concepts

¹ Research for this project is funded by the ERC advanced grant on ‘Problematizing “Muslim Marriages”: Ambiguities and Contestations’ (Grant number: 2013-AdG-324180).

researchers use to study these phenomena have evolved in tandem. Whereas earlier forms of mobility were the object of migration theory, which took stasis as the norm with migration to be explained by push and pull factors, by the later 1990 this has shifted to a recognition of the importance, and even the celebration of mobility. It had also become evident that people may well remain connected to multiple locations, with migrants embedded in webs of transnational relations (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Cresswell & Uteng, 2008; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). This turn to mobility and transnationalism became critically qualified through a recognition that mobility is not equally accessible to all, but is gendered, classed, and racialized, that the mobility of some is built on the immobility of others, and that mobility may also be a negative choice rather than an aspiration (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). Others have argued that the routes and channels migrants can follow, the destinations they can reach and their life chances after migration are shaped by their differential access to particular forms of economic, social and cultural capital (Van Haer, 2014). Such access is, moreover, structured through the positionality of our interlocutors in terms of gender, ethnicity, and religion. As we focus on a form of migration that may well be religiously signified, particular attention needs to be paid to religion.²

Hijra as a form of religious migration has largely been neglected in the work of scholars of migration and mobility. When Muslims leave Europe this has often been understood in secular terms as return migration. If theories of mobility paid attention to religion as a motivating force, this largely concerned historical studies of migration within Europe or from European countries to North-America for the sake of being able to freely practice religion. Such a perspective has not been entertained to understand the emigration of European Muslims. In their case, religiously motivated migration has generally been framed as a jihadi security threat or as inspired by a Salafi orientation, which has increasingly been labelled as an undesirable form of Islam (Olsson, 2012, Adraoui, 2017, also introduction to this volume). Our approach to ‘making *hijra*’, neither starts from a secular migration/mobility approach, nor from a jihadi/Salafi-focused securitization perspective. Instead, we investigate how our interlocutors themselves signify ‘leaving Europe’ for Muslim majority countries.

Turning from the field of mobility to that of religion, it has been convincingly argued that mobility, including making *hijra*, has been central to the Islamic tradition (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1990).³ To better understand this form of mobility, we have found Hage’s concept of ‘existential mobility’ helpful. Existential mobility, as Hage puts it, is a ‘type of imagined/felt movement.’ People engage in the physical form of mobility that we call migration, he argues, ‘because they are after existential mobility’ (Hage, 2009: 98). He juxtaposes this sense of mobility with a sense of ‘stuckedness’, which, like mobility, has both a physical and an existential dimension. Such an approach is helpful to go beyond a focus on the socio-economic motivations

² Such as focus on different forms of capital and their in/convertibility is inspired by Bourdieu (2011). However, Bourdieu’s take on religion is very different from ours, as he engages with religion in instrumentalist and organizational terms and consider it an institution of coercion (see Verter, 2003: 151)

³ The other forms of mobility mentioned are the *hajj*, travelling in the pursuit of knowledge or proselytizing (*rihla*) and visits to saints tombs (*ziyara*).

for migration to also include religious aspirations. In line with Lambek (2000: 309; 316), it does not only focus on instrumental reason but also takes ethical dimensions into account in order to understand making *hijra* as a meaningful ethico-religious practice.

A focus on making *hijra* also brings us back to debates about religion and the everyday. Those who have been critical of the ‘religious turn’ (linked to Asad, 1986) have argued that too much attention has been paid to the religious aspirations and practices of the most observant Muslims, overlooking less committed Muslims, and the ambiguities and contestations that characterize everyday life (Schielke, 2010).⁴ Others, in turn, have warned of the risk of a-priori associating the everyday with, or even reducing it to, the non-religious, excluding forms of self-disciplinary piety from the everyday (Fadil & Fernando, 2015; Jouili, 2015). Using an anthropological perspective, we start with the question whether and how our interlocutors themselves signify particular norms and practices as Islamic. Rather than assuming a particular presence or absence of Islam in the everyday, we empirically explore how moral norms and everyday life ‘are coconstituted in relation to one another, which means that their coproduction works in both directions.’ (Deeb, 2015: 96). In the case of making *hijra*, this invites an exploration of how our interlocutors signify and experience making *hijra* and whether their material conditions and socio-cultural environments enable or obstruct the enactment of their ethical aspirations.

‘Being Muslim’ or ‘living a Muslim life’ means different things to different people, both in terms of intensity and substance. For some, religion may function as an important ethical force shaping their lives (also when they are not able to live up to these norms), for others, it may not be much more than an ambiguous cultural epithet. Our interlocutors consider themselves observant Muslims, to whom living a Muslim life matters a great deal. They do not commit to a particular school of Islamic thought, but may be considered as inspired by the Islamic revival, with a strong focus on scriptural sources and a literalist approach to the practice of Islam. Whereas they have all left Europe for Muslim majority countries, they hold a variety of positions about *whether* doing so was religiously motivated, and if so, they differ in *how* they signify making *hijra* as a religious practice.

Our interlocutors are all converts to Islam. Most of them are white Dutch, while a few had immigrated to the Netherlands as a child or as an adult, or had parents from former Dutch colonies. We consider a focus on converts especially helpful to gain insight in the often tense and ambivalent relation between religious and ethno-national belonging that are implicated in making *hijra*. White converts, especially, have directly experienced how their conversion to Islam – and being recognizably Muslim because of their appearance and conduct - has turned them from being part of an unmarked national majority into the position of a racialized minority.⁵ At the same time, our interlocutors tended to distance themselves from what they

⁴ Much of this work was in itself a response to the refusal of social scientists to take the religious motivations of their interlocutors seriously (see, for instance, Mahmood, 2005 on veiling).

⁵ The racialization of Muslims refers to the process of categorizing, naturalizing and essentializing Muslims on the basis of physical characteristics or cultural/religious practices as different from the dominant population (see for a more in-depth discussion of this concept Garner & Selod, 2015).

considered the habitual, cultural forms of Islam present in migrant communities. Many of them have been active as volunteers or participants in Muslim women's groups to gain more knowledge about Islam, turning to the foundational texts in search for a 'pure' Islam (Özyürek, 2014; Rogozen-Soltar, 2017; Vroon-Najem, 2014).⁶ There was, however, not an absolute divide between our interlocutors and women from Muslim families. Whereas these women's groups had often been founded by women converts they also welcomed and attracted women from Muslim background, in particular second generation post-migrant women. These women similarly felt the need to learn more about Islam, as their families either were not very religious or adhered to what they would call 'culturalized' Islam (Jouili, 2015, 2019). One question that emerges then is how our interlocutors relate their move to a Muslim majority setting to being able to live the Muslim life to which they aspire.

When our interlocutors left the Netherlands, a small number in the late nineties, most of them in the first 15 years of the new millennium, they generally were in their late twenties or early thirties, and already had children. In our engagements with them, next to many informal conversations, we collected approximately fifteen topical life stories, focusing on what 'making *hijra*' meant to them, how they traced their trajectory and what had motivated them to leave and to come back. We had already interviewed some of them prior to their departure. While they lived abroad, we were able to remain connected through social media, blogs and newsletters, as well as during their vacations in the Netherlands. When, eventually, most of them returned to stay, we interviewed them again, to gain insight in how their migration experiences had affected their aspirations.⁷

In the following we start with '*hijra* talk', that is how our interlocutors talk about what 'making *hijra*' means to them, and how they signify leaving Europe.⁸ We also use this section to introduce some of them, selected not because they are statistically representative, but because together they present the range of positions our interlocutors took up. We then analyze how the physical and existential im/mobility of these women is structured through the forms of capital they have access to, with particular attention paid to the ways in which religion is at stake. We end with a reflection on how religious aspirations, material conditions, social relationships, and cultural dispositions are entangled in how our interlocutors signify and experience making *hijra* and their return to Europe.

⁶ The emergence of such groups may be seen as part of the wider Islamic revival movement, that had emerged in the Muslim world in the 1970s, and a decade later amongst Muslims in Europe, that aimed at maintaining an Islamic way of life deemed under threat by processes of secularization. One important focus was on turning 'habitual' Muslims into 'reflexive, conscious Muslims' or 'Muslims by conviction' (Jouili, 2015).

⁷ Whereas almost all of our interlocutors have returned to the Netherlands, (converted) Muslims leaving Europe to make *hijra* and returning again, is an ongoing process.

⁸ In order to protect their privacy, we use pseudonyms and do not specify to which Muslim majority countries individual women migrated. We do, however, discuss those aspects of their location that are relevant for how they experience making *hijra* and that affect their sense of existential and physical im/mobility. Their destinations include Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey.

Hijra talk: The multiple meanings of making hijra

Whereas our interlocutors hold a variety of points of view about what *hijra* means to them and whether they consider it desirable or even obligatory to make *hijra*, all of them can relate to the concept. As non-Arabic speakers, they had usually become familiar to the term when learning about Islam, and hence, they referred to its religious connotation. They were well aware that amongst religious scholars there has been, and still is, a range of opinions as to whether and under which conditions Muslims ought to make *hijra*. The well-known Salafi scholar Al-Albani, for instance, to whom some of our interlocutors referred, is of the opinion that making *hijra* is a religious obligation, if one has the possibility to do so. Other religious authority figures only considered *hijra* necessary if one is unable to practice one's religion freely. Yet another position, associated with for instance the Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, considered being involved in doing da'wa (proselytizing) a valid argument to remain in non-Muslim lands (see introduction to this volume).⁹

Where then did our interlocutors position themselves? After their conversion, most of them focused on what they called practicing 'true Islam', often based upon a scripturalist reading of the example of the prophet Mohammed and his companions. They did not consider themselves as adherents of a particular Islamic school of thought or orientation. The main differentiation we discerned amongst our interlocutors tallied with the extent to which they had become active in the religious field, had taken up informal leadership positions, for instance by starting a women's group, organizing religious lectures for (converted) Muslim women, and were considered by others as more knowledgeable about Islam. These women more often considered 'making *hijra*' as part of the Islamic tradition and hence as a desirable act, even if holding a variety of views about what 'making *hijra*' entailed. Women who only attended meetings of these groups, in contrast, far less often used an Islamic vocabulary. Instead, when discussing making *hijra*, they would point to the value of living in a Muslim environment where practicing Islam would be the norm, rather than being looked upon with suspicion, as they had experienced in the Netherlands. Still, this division between 'organizers' and 'participants' was not a clear line of demarcation, but remained rather fluid. Moreover, as the trajectories of our interlocutors indicate, they also modified or adapted their positions about making *hijra* and its meanings over time, on the basis of their migration experiences.

Hijra as part of the Islamic tradition

Those amongst our interlocutors who signified making *hijra* in strongly Islamic terms, usually did so on the basis of referencing the teachings of specific Islamic scholars, such as the previously mentioned Al-Albani. Still, also amongst these women, there were significant variations in what they did and did not consider a

⁹ See, for instance, <http://maktabasalafiya.blogspot.com/2011/12/obligation-of-hijrah.html> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjTtSu7Iyfo> and <https://islamqa.info/en/47672> all last accessed on 28 December 2020.

‘true *hijra*’. Here we introduce some of them more extensively to provide an impression of the range of positions they took up.

Sumaya’s family was not particularly religious but she had attended a Christian school and was interested in religion from a young age. In her late teens, she had converted to Islam, just before she met her husband. He did not live in the Netherlands at the time, but came over during school holidays to work with a relative. After she finished high school, they married, and together they travelled to his country of origin, where he completed his business degree. Whereas he did not come from an overly religious family, over time, both became increasingly inspired by the ideals of the Islamic revival. After returning to the Netherlands, they became very active in the field of *da’wa*, aiming to ‘educate Muslims about the real meaning of Islam’, with Sumaya starting a women’s group, that was very well attended. By the mid-2000s, after many others in their circle had already left the Netherlands, they decided to ‘make *hijra*’, too, and moved with their children to her husband’s country of origin. Their goal was to start an educational project there for the benefit of fellow Muslims.

Sumaya made a strong distinction between leaving the Netherlands to ‘make *hijra*’, and their earlier visits to his home country. ‘Making *hijra*’, she contended, can only be considered as such if the intention is to emigrate permanently, with the aim to strengthen Muslim life. Referring to those cases where the husband would stay in, or remain strongly connected to, the Netherlands to earn a living, she said: “I do not think it is *hijra* if women live abroad and their husbands are still fulltime working [in the Netherlands] ... *Hijra* is when your whole family lives there and you really leave. If you stay and work, you’re still dependent on this country. That’s not *hijra* from an Islamic point of view. ... Of course it’s okay if you think it’s better to raise your children there, that is fine, but that’s not cutting all ties and really settling there.’

Rebecca grew up amongst Muslim friends in a multi-cultural neighborhood. Raised without a religion but interested in Islam from a young age, she adopted many Islamic tenets before acknowledging that, in fact, she had become Muslim herself. Being lonely after conversion, she took up volunteer work to help-out new converts and started an informal, (converted) Muslim women’s group. In her mid-twenties, about 5 years after her conversion, she met her husband, a second generation post-migrant, born and raised in the Netherlands. By then she had obtained a higher education diploma, while he owned a small business. Both of them were quite strict in their religious orientation, and she preferred not to work outdoors after marriage. They only met a few times before marriage, as both rejected dating. During these talks, he already mentioned his intentions to make *hijra* in the future. Whereas, at the time, she had no clear stance on the subject, gradually, she adopted the view that making *hijra* is obligatory for Muslims, referring to the work of Al-Albani.

When her best friend left the Netherlands to make *hijra*, she felt it was time to leave as well, while the children were still small and would more easily adapt to life in his parents’ country of origin. The plan was that her husband would soon follow, but this never materialized. Rebecca does, however, consider the time she spent there as ‘making *hijra*’: ‘My husband didn’t follow, but why would that not be ‘making *hijra*’ for me? His intention was to come, but unfortunately, *qadr Allah*, it

didn't work out.' Unable to speak the language and with limited resources, life there was very difficult for a single mother with a large family and after a year, she moved to England. When we asked whether she considered this also as 'making *hijra*', she answered: 'No, even if you could hear the *adhaan* in the neighborhood where we were living, England is not a Muslim country'.

Hind came from a family in which the environment, spirituality and the peace movement were important parts of life. After high school, she did not pursue higher education. In her late teens, she fell in love with a Muslim, converted to Islam, and they entered into an Islamic marriage. However, as happens more often in the case of converts, she became more serious in her religious practice than her husband, and the marriage did not last. Some years later, after her mother had passed away, Hind became full-time involved in learning about and teaching Islam. She started a successful Muslim women's group, combining a strict, text-based orientation with the use of Islamic knowledge to empower young women, such as by supporting them in the case of forced marriages.

For a long time, Hind considered making *hijra* a religious obligation. Only those involved in *da'wa*, can legitimately remain in Europe, she believed. Even though she was in fact involved in *da'wa* herself, her dream at the time was to move to a country where she could 'be buried in peace.' She expected life in a Muslim majority country to be much more relaxed: 'A place where people accept you for who you are. Here, everyone looks at you in a funny way.' Similar to the other women we talked to, 'making *hijra*' was strongly connected to 'keeping your family safe' and the wish that the children would learn Arabic. 'We did not grow up with it so we want to give it to our children.'

Hind left the Netherlands three times, to two different Muslim majority countries 'with the intention to never return'. In her words, 'a real *hijra fi sabilillah*.'¹⁰ Her desire to travel to the South dated back to her high school days, but was now presented in an Islamic framework. Hind loved 'other cultures' and looked forward to going to 'a country with palm trees, where it's warm, where you hear the *adhaan*, where the streets are sandy, and where people accept you'. This stands in contrast to Sumaya, who held a far less romantic view about life in a Muslim majority country. She, for once, did not particularly like her husband's country, calling it 'crowded and dirty', and specifically warned against the danger of converts' too rosy expectations of making *hijra*, which she dubbed 'the pink cloud'. 'I did not have a pink cloud, I knew about life there, I was more negative than positive', Sumaya told us.

When they left the Netherlands, all three women considered making *hijra* as highly valued in religious terms, as the next step on the path towards religious growth. They all agreed that 'making *hijra*' meant migrating to, and settling in, a Muslim majority country. Leaving with the intention to do so permanently, mattered to all of them. Still, their narratives also differed in some ways. Sumayya, who had left together with her husband and children, most strongly underlined the need of a complete break. Rebecca, in contrast, also considered her, in hindsight, temporary migration as *hijra*, even if her husband did not manage to join her. Leaving to a

¹⁰ Emigration for the sake of God, i.e. not for worldly causes.

Muslim country with the correct intention was for her sufficient to call this ‘making *hijra*’. Whereas neither Sumayya (who returned for health reasons) nor Rebecca (who returned to be with her husband) have completely given up on the ideal of making *hijra*, Hind’s position has become very different. While emphasizing that for her *hijra* also had meant to leave with the intention to never return, after several failed attempts to make *hijra* as a single mother, she is no longer convinced of its religious value. Reflecting on her previous positions about Islam, she had come to regret many of them (especially what she now rejected as too rigid an approach), including that it was mandatory for a Muslim to make *hijra*.

At the same time, the narratives of these women also contained aspects that were not directly linked to religious tenets. For Hind, the religious aspect was strongly entangled with rather romantic visions of leading a simple life somewhere in the Muslim world, while she also expressed her desire ‘to improve the world’. This she saw also as a continuity with her life prior to conversion as ‘it is based on my love for the prophet and for Islam, but it is also my character’. For Sumaya, *hijra* meant trying ‘to build something for Muslims in an Islamic country.’ In the Netherlands, she contended, what you build-up, can always be taken away from you. ... You want changes in the Arab world’. The idea of contributing to the good of society was important to her in multiple ways; the educational project they intended to set up, did not only focus on Islamic substance, but also on conveying this content through modern didactical methods. Reflecting on this idealism, she added: ‘I think that most of us did not leave to bake cookies or sit with the family’. Some women then did not only engage with the subject-focused ethical work of self-cultivation, but also presented their activities in terms of a relational ethics, that is an ethics of care for and responsibility towards others, that may or may not be Islamically grounded (see Jouili, 2015: 18).

Making *hijra*: Living in a Muslim environment

Not all of our interlocutors framed their migration to a Muslim majority country as making *hijra* in a religious sense. Some women we spoke to were not overtly concerned with the question whether making *hijra* was religiously required. They related migration to religion in a different way. Rather than considering making *hijra* as a matter of religious dogma, they argued that it would be easier to live a Muslim life in a Muslim majority country where the presence of Islam would be self-evident. While some of these women had converted to Islam after they had married, they also considered themselves observant Muslims and Islam had become an important part of their lives. They all had also moved towards wearing more covering visibly Muslim styles of dress. We introduce some of them here as well, presenting their particular perspectives on making *hijra*.

Imane grew up in a non-religious middle class family, in a white neighborhood with very few Muslims. After moving to Amsterdam, she obtained an MA and took up professional employment. In her late twenties, she met her husband, who had left his country because of civil war. After years of study, reflection, and attending meetings of a Muslim women’s group, she converted to Islam. A few years later,

their first child was born, with two more to follow. In 2011, when the oldest was seven, they decided to move to her husband's country of origin. Looking back at that decision, she underplayed the religious connotation of making *hijra*, 'I don't think I made *hijra* to make *hijra*. I did it because my husband really wanted it and because I saw advantages for the children, that they would live there and learn the language. ... It is more natural for them to grow up in a Muslim society, close to their family'. She did not believe it was mandatory for Muslims to make *hijra*, further explaining, '*Hijra* simply is a short term for migration to your husband's country. ... I have been thinking about *hijra* as a concept. For me, you can also do *hijra* in your own country ... [for instance] from a location where there are only a few Muslims to a location where there are more Muslims, as we did. We moved from the city center to a neighborhood with more Muslims.' Asked if she would consider moving to the UK as making *hijra*, too, she answered: 'Yes, emigration to Birmingham, you can call that *hijra*'.

Anna, who grew up in a small town, in a Catholic middle-class family, also completed a university education. When she was in her early twenties, she had met her husband, a first-generation labor migrant, who had been forced to leave school in his early teens. After visiting his country, she became more interested in Islam, and began to read, attended meetings of Muslim women's groups, and converted 3 years later. After her conversion they got married. Two years into the marriage, just after the birth of their first child, they took the step to move to his home country. She did not consider this making *hijra*. 'For me, making *hijra* is if you do it for your religion. We didn't do that. It was his country, he wanted to work there for himself. ... I have read about making *hijra*, and I know that my intention was not for Allah, not for religion, my intention was practical.' When we asked her whether it might have *also* been a religious act, she said, 'No, I had travelled there before. There is more religious freedom in the Netherlands than there. Of course it's easier when everyone is fasting, and you hear the *adhaan* five times a day. But the things I did, going to lectures and so on, that was not available there. In terms of religion, I'm better-off here than there'.

Julia had a difficult start in life. Her parents, who were labor migrants from elsewhere in Europe, had a nasty divorce when she was young, and she moved a lot. She entered into a vocational training track, but the school failed her abysmally, and, eventually, she dropped out. At school, she had met Muslim girls while she was raised as a Catholic. She easily combined both religions, mentioning that 'Jesus was important to me, that's the same in Islam'. At age 15, she decided to become Muslim and started to attend lectures at a Muslim women's group. When a first generation migrant with a call shop, proposed marriage, she accepted within a few weeks. Thinking back at that rash decision she reflects: 'I was young and naïve, I wasn't going to school. I saw people who were married and were happy'. Almost 19 years old, she had her first child, and they went a few times to his country of origin for extended visits. When they decided to emigrate, in 2011, they had three young children and both had become more practicing Muslims. When we asked her about religious considerations, she explained, 'Half-half. He also had other reasons, he wanted to go to his country, with the children. It is better for them there, more friendly ... For me, it was also an adventure, to do something crazy, like other people

go travel the world'. When we asked if she was influenced by seeing others leave she explained, 'Yes and no, if you see people leave, you think, shall I try it too? But, no, it was for the children. In my opinion you can be a Muslim everywhere'. But by then she had started to wear a face-veil, and that became a factor in her consideration to leave: 'If people looked funny at me, I worried, will the children be bullied because of me? And perhaps it will become prohibited, then I cannot really be myself.'

The women we introduced here were not much concerned with questions whether 'making *hijra*' was obligatory or not; their arguments were by and large pragmatic. Reflecting on making *hijra* as a concept, in Imane's view, this meant to live in a Muslim environment, and that could also be in Europe. Rather than referring to Muslim territory, that is to live in a Muslim country under Muslim rule, what mattered to her is a 'more Muslim' social environment, with, for instance, easier access to halal food and with a mosque or an Islamic school nearby. Anna, pointing to the importance of intentionality in Islam, was quite explicit in refusing to consider her migration as making *hijra*. Already prior to leaving, she realized that there was more religious freedom in the Netherlands; still even she mentions the advantages of a self-evident Muslim environment. Julia did to some extent signify her *hijra* as religious, yet, being still very young at the time, also used the secular language of a search for adventure, only to then share her concerns about a possible prohibition of face-veiling. Whereas these women did not mark making *hijra* in doctrinal terms or frame it as part of the Islamic tradition, neither was their migration outside of the field of religion and simply a secular act. For all of them it was a family project, a relational ethics, that entailed a desire to raise their children in an environment where being Muslim was the norm, where they would more easily learn Arabic, and where Islam was self-evidently present in everyday life.

Im/mobility in everyday life

The topics of mobility and movement already emerged in the life trajectories of our interlocutors prior to their discussions of migration. To start with, they often framed their conversion as a process that involved various forms of movement. Becoming Muslim, as part of a process of existential reorientation, was in itself considered a positive step forward (Vroon-Najem, 2014). But it did not stop there. Being Muslim is also usually talked about in dynamic terms as it is similarly envisioned, by converts as well as other Muslims, as a path that will take a lifetime to travel. On this path, our interlocutors felt the necessity to learn more about Islam, 'gaining knowledge' as they phrased it. This can also be considered a form of moving forward, as knowledge is supposed to be acted upon in order to improve practice and facilitate a deeper engagement with Islam.¹¹ Entering into marriage and starting a family were

¹¹ A common pitfall for new Muslims, sometimes dubbed "convertitis" (e.g. Roald, 2012; Turner, 2019), is to move too fast, only to discover that adopting too many new practices in a short amount of time will be untenable. The most often heard advice within Muslim women's groups, and at other forms of convert counseling, is to take things slow and walk the path as new Muslims "step by step".

also considered important steps forward, with our interlocutors often referring to the importance of marriage in Islam.

The reason for many of our interlocutors to consider migration has to do with what we describe, following Hage, as an ‘sense of stuckedness.’ Whereas they considered becoming Muslim as a form of existential mobility, it can simultaneously engender a sense of stuckedness. One major reason is that conversion to Islam puts up for question their self-evident ethno-national belonging, that is their Dutchness. This is not the case because converts themselves feel they do not belong anymore, but because they are regularly confronted with having their national belonging questioned by the majority population.

The concept of the nation-state has produced the myth that each territorial state is populated by a people with its own distinct national culture (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997), whereas in practice the population of nation-states is far from homogeneous. Nation-states are built on the paradox that their citizens are formally equal, while national belonging privileges specific ethnic-racial and religious groups (in our case, white Christian/secular Dutch) as the unmarked category (Baumann, 1999). During the last decades, state policies have, moreover, increasingly required minorities to prove their national belonging (often referred to as ‘the culturalization of citizenship’ Geschiere, 2009). Muslims, in particular, have become a racialized category, linked to a wide range of undesirable phenomena (Garner & Selod, 2015; Jouili, 2015; Klug, 2012; Sayyid & Vakil, 2010). Whereas this is not specific for converts, especially those converts who are white and are recognizably Muslim, experience in a particularly salient way that they are *no longer* accepted as part of the nation.¹²

If converts consider conversion as a step forward, many non-Muslim Dutch, including family and (former) friends of converts, consider conversion to Islam as taking a step back, in line with popular notions of Islam as ‘a backward religion’. They express this sentiment even stronger when women converts start to wear a headscarf and become visibly Muslim. This discrepancy between converts’ positive feelings of moving forward and the appraisal of their choices amongst non-Muslims as moving backwards, translates in a constantly felt need to explain oneself and one’s choices. Many converts, as well as other Muslims, deal with this mismatch by acting as ‘ambassadors of Islam’ (Van Es, 2019), but they also become weary of these suspicions and are concerned about the effect of such a Muslim-unfriendly social climate on their children, and *their* sense of belonging.

Such a sense of existential stuckedness, of not being able to ‘move on’, as it were, is often strengthened because of the way in which it intersects with material aspirations, or simply concerns about material life. These are often connected to women’s marriage trajectories as many of our interlocutors had married a first or second generation migrant. These men regularly lacked the kinds of social and cultural capital that would make it easy for them to climb the social ladder, while they were also confronted with a socio-political climate that had become increasingly critical of the

¹² Converts elsewhere in Europe have similar experiences, see Galonnier (2015) for France, Özyürek (2014) for Germany, Rogozen-Soltar (2012) for Spain, Moosavi (2015) for the UK, and Jensen (2008) for Denmark. For the Netherlands see also Van Nieuwkerk (2004), and Ter Laan (this volume).

presence of Muslim migrants. Faced with limited economic resources, some women lived in small, noisy apartments, experiencing rather harsh living conditions. For the women themselves, conversion to Islam may also have negative material consequences, such as when careers are interrupted if the workplace is deemed insufficiently *halal* or incompatible with wearing *hijab*. Focussing on these material elements, Anna explained, ‘He wanted to go to his native country to start a business, and I agreed. For me, that choice was partly connected to wanting to have children. I knew I would have to continue to work after our children would be born and I knew I would also bear the brunt of combining work and child care. I didn’t feel like that, so that was a reason for me to say “okay, let’s go”. So we went for very practical reasons.’

Whereas the socio-cultural and material effects of conversion and their marriage to a (post-) migrant often engendered a sense of ‘stuckness’, it was at the same time through their marriage that our interlocutors gained at least potential access to non-mainstream forms of social and cultural capital. Family ties and social networks in their husbands’ country of origin, their husbands’ knowledge of the language and culture, and legal rights, such as access to residency permits, all opened particular avenues of mobility. Not surprisingly, almost all our interlocutors left Europe to settle in their husband’s or his parents’ country of origin.

Migratory experiences: Stuck again and waiting it out

As it turned out, many of our interlocutors would, however, eventually return to the Netherlands. After a shorter or longer time abroad, they again experienced a sense of being stuck. One set of issues relates to the material conditions they were confronted with, as many of our interlocutors were to face financial problems when their husband’s ambitions to develop a business that would provide them with a source of livelihood, proved hard to accomplish. Similar to other return migrants, they may have been too optimistic, highlighting the possibilities and overlooking the obstacles. The networks they had expected to become part of were less strong than they remembered or had experienced on shorter term visits, and they were unable or unwilling to navigate the mores of the bureaucracies, such as with respect to bribes that might smoothen or speed-up obtaining permits. Public education was often deemed unsuitable for their children, while private education was very expensive and thus a considerable cost the couple had to reckon with. In a twist of irony, in many cases the net effect was that the husbands were forced to stay connected to the Netherlands, often returning to work there at least part-time, and hence were absent for long periods of time. This was not how our interlocutors had imagined their life as a family abroad.

Another hurdle they faced was that their own access to economic resources was often limited. It is true that for some a motivating force to make *hijra* had been that they opted for a household economy based on the male breadwinner model as best befitting the Islamic order of things. But if our interlocutors wanted to work or needed to do so, it was very difficult for them to find suitable employment, especially as many lived outside of the urban centers. They had little opportunity to make

good use of one of their main forms of cultural capital, their education, as there was often very little they could do with the diplomas or the work experience they had gained, lacking sufficient knowledge of the local language. Some tried to develop an Internet business such as online consultancy, writing, or web-design, which can be done from anywhere in the world but none of the women in our research was able to make a real income from these activities. Hind, who had left with high expectations, travelling with her children, initially without a husband, was perhaps the most outspoken about how material conditions also mattered, when she expressed her disappointment with life in the Muslim world. In 2006 she had stated, ‘I love poor countries, much more than the Emirates, for instance’, but 10 years later, she had become far more critical. About a young convert who had said that she ‘would rather live with the *adhaan* in poverty, than in wealth in a *kafir* country’, she commented, ‘she had no idea what she was talking about and no idea what it means to be hungry and suffer pain’ Having experienced poverty herself, she no longer romanticized life in a poor country.

Our interlocutors were, however, not only confronted with the harshness of the material conditions they found themselves in, they also experienced the affective effects of the lack of social relationships and of cultural affinity and competences. Arriving in a new country, the women had to start anew with building a social network. One major problem was that they usually did not speak the local language, such as Arabic or Turkish. They often had not realized how difficult and time-consuming it would be to learn these languages, and they lacked the habitual cultural knowledge to act in such a way that they would easily fit in their social environment.¹³ Imane, for instance, who had worked as a highly educated professional before moving, faced great difficulties integrating into her new social setting: ‘I knew it would be tough but I thought, together with my husband and children it should work out. We had all the basics in place: a place to live, a stable income from the Netherlands [from a business and renting out their home] ... [but] I got crushed by my own expectations. I thought I would be able to integrate, but it remained two parallels that didn’t converge. ... I thought, I should try harder, the children were doing reasonably well, and it was not like I could just take the kids and leave.’ Unable to build a social network, she grew increasingly lonely until it became unbearable to stay. Her friend Sumaya - who had made *hijra* to another country - summarized this widely shared feeling very well: ‘You feel at home wherever you have social contacts. [If that’s the case,] *hijra* is easy ... but if you don’t have a social network, and you don’t build one, it becomes really tough.’

Sometimes, a combination of not fitting in and waiting it out, even translated in not learning the language on purpose, as in Anna’s case: When we mentioned to her that another convert had told us in an earlier interview that for *hijra* to be a success, three things were important: command of the language, lots of money, and lots of patience, she replied: ‘I had lots of patience! [And] yes, income, that’s one of the cruxes whether people can stay or need to return.’ But besides money troubles,

¹³ Boccagni (2014) also argues for the need to pay attention to sociability in the process of home-making,

more was at stake for Anna to produce a sense of feeling stuck: ‘In a way you don’t know what you get yourself into. Everything seemed perfect, I knew where I would live, I had a network there [of in-laws], but still, you don’t know. You don’t know how another culture will influence you. How well you know that culture in the first place.’ Being a well-educated woman who had moved to a rural area where many people had little if any formal education, she felt unsure how to fit in, and, more importantly, whether she even wanted to fit in. As with other emigrants, being abroad made our interlocutors – and often also their husbands – aware of how used they were to the ‘Dutch way’ of organizing everyday life. They had not realized there would be so many areas of contention: proper bedtimes for children, privacy issues, unannounced visitors, cooking dishes that were not quite the local taste. Language barriers prevented them from helping their children with their home-work or even understanding a teacher’s note when their husbands were in the Netherlands. And then there was yet another element that made them feel like ‘perpetual outsiders’, that is religious life.

Miscalculating religious capital

Even if our interlocutors realized that access to economic resources and building a social network may be difficult in a new environment, they had expected that their religious commitment and knowledge would help them feel at home in their new countries of settlement. A few of them even went with the intention to teach the local population about the correct practice of Islam. Yet once they had arrived, the situation on the ground often turned out to be different from what they had expected, also with respect to religiosity, both in their direct social environment (such as their family-in-law) and in society at large. Some of our interlocutors were quite explicit in their disappointment about those they had held in high regard. Hind, for instance, pointed out that men, also those with the appearance of being serious Muslims, often take advantage of female converts, who might then find themselves and their children in a precarious situation. After having returned to the Netherlands, Sumaya expressed her disappointment in more political terms: ‘*Hijra* is going to a country where the Islam is present. But that’s nowhere! ... The best is of course an Islamic country, under shari’a law to which also the rulers submit, but that doesn’t exist.’ In her view, religious scholars should state that clearly. ‘They still assume that Arab countries are Islamic, but that is not the case’.

When our interlocutors reflected on their experiences, it was evident location mattered, in the sense that particular settings may be more or less conducive to the development of meaningful social relationships and a sense of Islamic communality. Sumaya was acutely aware of this, ‘We first went to his village ... but we soon realized that would not work for our plans. So we went to the city ... We lived in an area with a lot of foreigners and locals who had also lived abroad.’ In her case, temporality, that is the particular historical moment, also mattered. ‘When we arrived, there were already a lot of Dutch converts there and also some women of Moroccan background, and foreign sisters from America. There were lots of lectures and we also did social things together. ... At the time we had two

groups, a Dutch group and an international group, led by an Egyptian woman who spoke English.’ Language was important, because even for those who had learned some Arabic, it was difficult to follow lectures. As one of her friends, who had attended some of these lectures, explained. ‘Most lessons were in Arabic, I preferred Dutch. Okay, you may say, that’s a way to learn the language, but I did not feel like doing that, I simply wanted to attend the lecture, I came for the substance’. Yet Sumayya’s narrative also indicates that what particular settings allowed for was not always stable. When after some years, the political situation had changed, this had major consequences. As she explained, ‘Only religious activities that were supportive to the regime were allowed. Most of the centres were shut down, and a lot of people left the country’. She and her friends continued their activities, but at their homes and at a much smaller scale.

Anna also pointed to the importance of location and historical moment as enabling or disabling particular forms of sociality. When emigrating, she had hoped they would live in a city, ‘I had lived in Amsterdam, I wanted to live a city-life’. But housing conditions in the city were crowded and expensive, so they decided to move to her husband’s village, where there was more space, also for the sake of the children. This village, however, was in a remote area, and under state surveillance, as men had been leaving from there to fight in Syria. ‘After the Arab Spring, there was an opening, but with respect to freedom of religion it is now again worse’, she said. As there was no paid work available, she thought about volunteering, organizing some workshops, but that was impossible, even if it would concern something practical like health education. ‘I bet if I would not have worn a headscarf - I am blond - then it would have been possible. But as I wear an abaya, which I like in hot weather, and a khimaar, they consider you a radical’. More generally, Anna also underlined that people in the village lived religion differently. ‘For instance, for Ramadan, I set goals for myself. There, nobody does that.’

With respect to their husbands’ family, our interlocutors often faced an ambiguous situation. Their in-laws were pleased that they had converted, but at the same time their ways of practicing Islam were often considered strange, ‘too much’, or simply different, yet another disappointment they had to reckon with. In a few cases women had married into a family with a similar religious orientation, or where there may have been an individual in the family with whom they were able to connect in religious terms. In those circumstances, their religious knowledge may have been appreciated. Often, however, it was considered more negatively, as an unwarranted form of criticism, a ‘knowing-it-better new Muslim.’ This often came as a surprise. As one of our interlocutors explained, ‘I expected it to be very Islamic, but it wasn’t at all, I was very disappointed. Sisters-in-law wearing make-up, I thought, that’s not allowed! Clothing with images of animals ... they said, if children are wearing it, that’s no problem. They did not consider music *haram*. My sisters-in-law wore nice headscarves and form-fitting coats, while I was wearing an abaya and khimaar. When walking next to them, I felt like a pauper. I wore simple sneakers, they thought that was weird. Only children wear sneakers. They wore shiny shoes with high heels.’ In other words, also in settings where in-laws were wearing hijab, their styles of dress may well be very different.

Not being able to connect and to find religious support, all women remained in close contact with Muslim friends back home in the Netherlands. When Imane's marriage got into trouble, amongst other things about returning to the Netherlands, she first asked her husband's family for help and then approached the local imam. But their response was 'we know your husband as a good Muslim...'. As that was not very helpful, she then contacted one of the women in the Netherlands with whom she had been close. This friend then asked her husband, considered a religious authority, to intervene. 'He could not tell him to come back, making *hijra* is of course highly recommended in Islam, but he talked with him for hours through Skype, or rather, let him talk, and that helped a lot'.

In many cases then our interlocutors experienced a dissonance between their religious commitment and knowledge and the ways in which people in their new environment lived Islam. Building up new religious networks proved to be difficult in the social and political context they found themselves in, except for the few who lived in large urban centers. Yet these women also faced problems once the political situation became more repressive. As a result, the Dutch networks they had been participating in, remained of paramount importance, even if, as many said, online contacts could not replace the need for face-to-face interactions.

Returning to the Netherlands

After having 'waited it out' as long as possible, hoping better times would arrive, almost all of our interlocutors eventually returned to the Netherlands. Some did so because they were unable to integrate into their local setting, struggling with loneliness, others because of financial struggles, when husbands failed to become economically successful enough to support the family. If husbands were unable to make *hijra* themselves, some grew tired of running a household by themselves and wanted their children to grow up with their father present. Yet others had their residency papers revoked, or returned for health reasons.

Returning to the Netherlands was often a challenge as well. Finding a place to live, financial difficulties because of debts that had build-up during years of economic hardships related to 'making *hijra*', children who had to re-integrate into the Dutch education system, were all common difficulties our interlocutors had to face. Nevertheless, many women were relieved to be back in the Netherlands, and felt that they were again, moving a step forward. Central heating, uninterrupted Internet, better-organized social services, to name but a few things they mentioned, were much more appreciated after living abroad for some time, in conditions where these were not self-evident. Even if they still thought it would be better for their children to be raised in a Muslim country, they often realized that they would not be happy there themselves. Sending their children to an Islamic school in the Netherlands and keeping an eye on their social life, they hoped to create an environment in which their children could grow up feeling positive about their Muslimness. After experiencing being an outsider, many felt better off in the Netherlands, with far more opportunities for attending religious lectures, with other Islamic activities available in Dutch, and with religiously inspired forms of sociality with like-minded Muslim

women within easy reach. Some of them kept hoping to be able to make *hijra* again, but most of our interlocutors felt they had returned permanently, or at least for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Our exploration of how our interlocutors signified and experienced making *hijra* brings together academic fields often kept separately, that is mobility and religion. Our research indicates that im/mobility and the language of movement are central to the lives of our interlocutors. They presented conversion as a process, a spiritual path to follow step by step. Making *hijra* was part of such a movement forward. The majority population, in contrast, valued both conversion and leaving Europe very differently, that is, as ‘moving backwards’. To better understand the mobility of religious actors we need to broaden, or perhaps better, to desecularize the study of mobility to include not only physical and socio-economic mobility, but also religious, existential mobility.

Our research also contributes to the study of religion and relates to debates about Islam and everyday life. Using an anthropological approach, we started from how our interlocutors present their *hijra* trajectories. As they consider themselves as observant Muslims, their move from Europe to a Muslim majority country is easily seen as motivated by religious prescriptions. This would, however, not do justice to the variety of positions they take up. We were struck by the different weight given to religious arguments in their narratives as well as by the variety of ways in which they signified *hijra* as a religious practice. Some would consider making *hijra* as part of the Islamic tradition, considering it a recommendable if not obligatory act, even if holding divergent views about what counts as a ‘real *hijra*’. Others would not signify their migration as religiously motivated yet would still point to the benefits of living in an environment where Islam is self-evidently present as normative. If for some of our interlocutors making *hijra* was an individual path of ethical improvement, many highlighted the value of making *hijra* for the benefit of others, be it to allow their children to grow up in a Muslim-friendly environment supportive of religious life, or to assist the Muslim community and its development more generally. In other words, they signified making *hijra* in terms of a relational, collective ethical project.

Inherent to discussions about Islam and everyday life is that these terms are highly polysemic and ambiguous. One way to explore this relation is to investigate how moral norms and everyday practices are constituted in relation to each other, as Deeb (2015) proposed. Our interlocutors highlighted time and again how material conditions and pragmatic considerations impacted on their ability to enact their ethical aspirations and how their everyday experiences may affect and modify their aspirations. The lack of financial resources, problems with residency permits, and inadequate access to health care caused substantial problems and pushed some of our interlocutors to return to the Netherlands.

The academic debate about Islam and the everyday resonates with what our interlocutors refer to as the relation between religion and culture. Their experiences of being turned into a racialized minority in the Netherlands, made it attractive to them

to move to a Muslim majority country where Islam would be self-evidently present which they also expected to affect their children positively. Yet, making *hijra* placed them in a rather paradoxical situation. In the Netherlands, many of our interlocutors had aimed at practicing a ‘pure’, Islam, different from the practices of migrant communities which they saw as often tainted by their culture. Yet in the Muslim majority countries where they settled they found themselves in an environment where such culturalized forms of Islam were omnipresent.¹⁴ A few of them had been aware of this before leaving, but many had not. It is true that also in Muslim majority countries, the Islamic revival had had an impact. Yet our interlocutors found themselves in settings where either because of their location, their social environment or because of political repression, it was difficult to connect with, or even find, like-minded Muslims.

Something else was at stake, too. Our interlocutors were also confronted with the force of habitual practices, outside of the religious realm. This made them much more conscious of their attachment to ‘the Dutch way of doing things’. It proved difficult to live differently and to fit into their new social environment. Their return to the Netherlands then makes the tensions visible between, on the one hand, moral norms and ethical aspirations and, on the other hand, material conditions and pragmatic concerns. It brings to the forth their ambivalences about how religion is lived in their countries of settlement, that is the pleasures of the self-evident presence of Islam and their discontent with what they considered culturalized forms of Islam. It also highlights their awareness of how their sense of self was shaped by habitual ‘Dutch’ conventions in everyday life. Reflecting on their experiences, some would consider ‘making *hijra*’ again, while others had become far more critical and no longer considered moving to the ‘Muslim world’ as a positive move.

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¹⁴ In their quest to distinguish between Islam and culture, our interlocutors, similar to those active in the Islamic revival movement, did not consider that Islam as present in the world is always already culturalized.

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