



# The rhetoric of Islamophobia: an analysis of the means of persuasion in Hege Storhaug's writings on Islam and Muslims

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## ABSTRACT

Few actors have had a greater impact on the “framing of Muslims” as a social and political “problem” in Norway since 2001 than Hege Storhaug of the government- and corporate billionaire funded civil society organization *Human Rights Service* (HRS). Using the methodological tools of the “rhetorical branch” of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and applying the Aristotelian concepts of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*, we analyze the bestselling popular title on Islam and Muslims ever published in Norway, namely Storhaug’s self-published 2015 title “Islam – The Eleventh Plague”. We argue that Storhaug’s popular success must be understood in light of her rhetorical appeals to femonationalism, the critique of religion and “Enlightenment” values. We show how she in her writings incites fear of the Muslim “Other” through specific rhetorical devices and a positioning of herself as a defender of the “nation” and the “people” – against national and international “elites”.

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## Introduction: framing Muslims in Norway – method and representativeness

In Norway, no single actor has been more influential in the “framing of Muslims” as the major social, cultural, economic and political problem today (Morey and Yaqin 2011) than Hege Storhaug of the civil society organization *Human Rights Service* (HRS). Her trajectory within the Norwegian public sphere can serve as an illustration of Bail’s description of the development by which the rhetorics and ideas about Islam and Muslims of a far-right fringe in the years after 11 September 2001 turned mainstream in the US (Bail 2015). Storhaug and the HRS’ rise to a position of influence has been a proverbial sign of the times in Norway and points to a shift in mainstream media discourse.

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It is part of a more general ideological change in Europe, but it also has a more local background. It is a result of her and her organization's political channels into the political elites, first and foremost in the governing populist right-wing *Progress Party* in Norway. Storhaug and the HRS have since 2001 been regularly referred to in Norwegian mainstream media. Through Hege Storhaug and the HRS' alliances with the populist right-wing Progress Party, in government in Norway since 2013, the HRS has received 22,5 million Norwegian kroner in state funding between 2005 and 2018, in addition to 4 million Norwegian kroner that it received from the right-wing controlled City Government of Oslo between 2012 and 2015 ([Skybakkmoen 2018](#)). Norwegian civil society organizations committed to an anti-racist platform have several times raised the issue of the state funding of the HRS and the potential conflict between this funding and the Norwegian state's statutory commitments under the 1965 UN International Convention Against All Forms of Racial Discrimination (UN-ICERD) with the ICERD Committee in Geneva, Switzerland ([Norwegian Centre Against Racism 2015, 2018](#)) The HRS' has also received undisclosed millions on private funding from corporate interests in Norway.

Among long-standing corporate billionaire funders of Storhaug and the HRS in Norway, we find the property magnate and hotelier Olav Thon (1923-) of the Thon Corporation in Norway, who is also a long-standing political donor of the governing right-wing populist Progress Party in Norway. Thon has for a number of years provided Storhaug and the HRS office space free of charge. Storhaug has also had prominent supporters amongst Norwegian media commentators in mainstream newspapers, and Norwegian right-wing academics. The most prominent among her supporters in the media commentariat in Norway have been Elin Ørjasæter of the liberal-conservative *Aftenposten*, and Kjetil Rolness of the liberal *Dagbladet* ([Rolness 2015; Ørjasæter 2016](#)). Among Norwegian academics, the social anthropologist Unni Wikan featured among Storhaug's early supporters ([Wikan 2006](#)).

In 2016, Norwegian news media reported on an anonymous group of Norwegian business leaders who had bought up a thousand copies of Storhaug's 2015 book, "Islam – the 11th Plague", and offered to deliver it free of charge to Norwegian public libraries ([Hauge 2016](#)). It is also known that a Progress Party cabinet secretary in the Norwegian Ministry for Immigration and Integration had offered free copies of Storhaug's book to public libraries ([Mortensen, Sveen, and Lindquist 2016](#)), and that the former Minister of Justice from the Progress Party, Sylvi Listhaug, who was forced to leave office under a cloud after posting a Facebook post linking the opposition social democratic Labour Party to salafi-jihadi terrorists in March 2018 ([Engelstad 2018](#)), recommended Storhaug's book on her Facebook page. Last but not least, Storhaug's widespread influence is a result of the success of her book, "Islam – the 11th Plague", which we will discuss in some detail in this article. Having



sold 41 000 copies in Norway, this book is in effect the bestselling title ever published on Islam and Muslims in Norway. It has also been translated into numerous languages, including English.

In order to understand her successful trajectory, however, it is necessary to take her specific rhetoric and her discursive strategies into account. The following analysis will be informed by critical discourse studies (CDS). We will focus on *what* Storhaug's texts do, and *how* they do it (Wodak and Meyer 2016). The main methodological tools, however, will be taken from what may be referred to as the rhetorical "branch" of CDS, and have their roots in classical rhetoric. Central here is what Aristotle refers to as the three "means of persuasion" available to the political speaker; *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. We will first consider the ways in which Storhaug builds her own credibility as a speaker-writer and projects her character (*ethos*), and secondly, we will examine her argumentative strategies, the arguments, tropes, figures and topoi chosen by her (*logos*), and last but not least we will analyze the emotions she tries to evoke in her readers' minds (*pathos*).

Storhaug's explicit goal is to have influence, to exert power, and change the minds of Norwegians. Hers is a meta-politics of the far-right aimed at establishing a discursive hegemony, and as such, similar to the meta-politics of many contemporary far-right movements and actors in Europe and the USA (Zúquete 2018). Even though Storhaug is an extremely active participant in anti-immigrant social media, we have chosen her books as our main objects. This choice is merited by their influence in Norwegian main-stream media and public sphere, but also because the book as a medium can be characterized as being slow. A book can by definition not be a product of sheer impulse, or only the heat of the moment.

By Islamophobia, we mean to refer to

socially reproduced prejudices and aversions against Islam and Muslims, and actions and practices which attack, exclude and discriminate against people on the account of these people either being, or being presumed to be Muslim, and to be associated with Islam. (Gardell 2011, 7)

The foundation of Islamophobia is in other words a form of essentialist thinking about hierarchized difference based on faith which is also found in various forms of racism (Bangstad 2014, 18–19). Storhaug and the HRS do as a matter of course not accept the term Islamophobia. Their strategy for discrediting the term has been to present a fabricated genealogy of the term (Karlsen 2010), first mooted by French secularist feminists Fourest and Venner in 2003 (Fourest and Venner 2003). Fourest and Venner alleged that the term was first used by Iranian "mullahs" as a means by which to counter secular Iranian feminists fighting the Khomeini regime's forced imposition of the chador on Iranian women after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. But the genealogy put forward by Fourest and Venner is "simply a fabrication" (Zia-Ebrahimi

2017). The HRS' Rita Karlsen also alleges, with reference to Fourest and Venner, that the term was used as a "smear" by Iranian mullahs against the late US lesbian feminist Kate Millett during her visit to Iran at the time of the Iranian Revolution. But there is in fact not a single reference to the term "Islamophobia" in Millett's own account of her visit to Iran (Millett 1982). The historian López has traced the term's origins back to the work of two French West Africanists, Alain Quillien and Maurice Delafosse, in 1910 already (López 2011).

As authors such as Svendsen (2014) and Kyllingstad (2017) have demonstrated, in hegemonic understandings of racism in Norway, racism is often presumed to presuppose talk of "race", or in other words, "racecraft" (Fields and Fields 2014). However, as historians of racism (Fredrickson 2002; Bethencourt 2013) have long documented, racism was based on cultural and religious markers of alleged inferiority long before the emergence of biological concepts of "race", and these bases of racism have for long co-existed and been co-imbricated. Cultural racism is now the dominant form of racism in Norway, but seeing "race" as a "sliding signifier" means that "the emphasis on cultural belonging does not silence the biological" (Hall 2017, 154).

## Ethos – the projection of character as a means of persuasion

According to Aristotle there is

persuasion through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others] on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge and room for doubt. [...] character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion. (Aristotle 1991, 38)

As noted above the *ethos* of Hege Storhaug, the character she is able to project, has changed radically – from being seen as a fringe character, a single-minded anti-immigrant spokesperson, not to be taken very seriously, she has come to be seen as a serious and concerned voice, worried about the future for "our" country and culture, and with a claim to facts and logic.

Through Norwegian mainstream media she has been given space to rework her *ethos* as an honest truth-seeking feminist, working tirelessly in the spirit of capital letters Enlightenment and Rationality. She has counted on several devoted sympathizers among syndicated columnists in Norwegian mainstream media. Most important of these is Kjetil Rolness, a trained sociologist and public intellectual in Norway. Though Rolness has recently changed tack, he has written in defense of Storhaug for years, starting with a famous commentary article on the "Hatred against Hege" (Rolness 2015). Here he alleged that Storhaug was the victim of an "irrational hatred and harassment" from "the left", in spite of her consistently "good motives":



for twenty years she has fought against forced marriage, female genital mutilation and oppression of women. She thinks that Muslim girls and women should have the same rights and freedoms as others. Because of this she has been actively resisted by the left-wing she stems from herself.

Rolness insisted that “normally you will have a hard time catching her making factual mistakes”.

What more than anything characterizes Storhaug’s own rhetorical and discursive strategies is expressing her anti-immigration and straightforwardly Islamophobic ideas through a universalist rhetoric which purports to be based upon human rights, feminism, LGBT rights and democratic, enlightenment ideas. The attempts to build her *ethos* by seeming to ground her claims and arguments in universalist and feminist themes are particularly salient and effective in a context like Norway’s, where the population is generally heavily invested in the notion that Norway is a global leader in gender equality and human rights. In critical race theory, the finding that sexual racism is central to nationalist self-representation and assumed superiority is by no means new (Wekker 2016, 3). Farris refers to *femonationalism* as “the participation of certain feminists in the stigmatization of Muslim men under the banner of gender equality” (Farris 2017, 4). Storhaug, however, is not a standard right-wing nationalist nor neo-liberal, since she actually comes out of a liberal and leftist tradition, and given that she started out as an activist for women’s and LGBT rights. In spite of her shift to the political far-right in Norway, she has managed to retain a significant following among sympathizers who identify as conservative, liberal or even left.

### **Islam – the “11th Plague”**

Storhaug’s self-published “Islam – the 11th Plague” from 2015 is her greatest publishing success to date and the bestselling title on Islam and Muslims in Norway of all times. Sales figures were greatly assisted by the extensive coverage of Storhaug and her book provided by Norwegian mainstream media outlets. It was to a large extent treated by Norwegian mainstream media as a fact-based book suitable for serious discussion (see Kubens and Seland 2015 for a case in point).

In addition to the obvious biblical connotation, the book’s title alludes to the famous Norwegian poet Arnulf Øverland’s (1889–1968) 1933 public lecture “Christianity – The Tenth Plague”. This was a public lecture the atheist and Communist poet Øverland held at the Student Society at the University of Oslo, and for which he was in 1933 charged and acquitted for blasphemy. Øverland’s trope was in the context of public discussions about Islam and Muslims in Norway first used by the Norwegian philosopher Gunnar Skirbekk in an op-ed published under the title “Islam- the 11th plague?” in 2004. (Skirbekk 2004). Storhaug’s invocation of Øverland in this context is of course

meant to position her as a heroic dissident in the tradition of great men and women of Norwegian letters. But not only that: Øverland was opposed to German Nazism and served prison time during the German occupation of Norway during World War II for his critical stance towards the Nazis. Storhaug sees Islam as akin to Nazism, and Muslims in Norway as akin to Nazis, and her invocation of Øverland is also to be understood in this context.

The book consists of thirteen chapters and a prologue, and the main message in the prologue lies in its first sentence, stating that "Once again we stand in the middle of a civilizational battle". "We", then – all of us, the Norwegian people, stand in a civilizational battle, between "Western civilization" and "Islam". And the phrase "once again" points back to the previous civilizational battle we were standing in, according to Storhaug, i.e. the one against Nazism.

Traverso and others have pointed to the fact that right-wing populism is "above all a *style* of politics rather than an *ideology*" (Traverso 2019, 15). In a rhetorical move common in right-wing populism, Storhaug positions herself not only as a courageous dissident, but also as a proverbial anti-elitist "voice of the people". From the back cover of her polemic, we learn that "Hege Storhaug is the untiring voice of the people against the fever of goodness in politics, academia and the media". According to Müller, "populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people" (Müller 2015, 3). But "this claim to exclusive representation is not an empirical one; it is always distinctively *moral*" (3). It is also, according to scholars of populism, "a necessary but not sufficient condition to be *critical of elites* in order to count as a populist" (Müller 2016, 2). For Storhaug "politics, academia and the media" represent the "elites" and she herself represents a "prophetic voice of the people" uniquely able to discern and speak up for the interests of "the people". In the far-right popular genre in which Storhaug writes, this self-positioning and self-representation as a "prophetic voice and seer" is by no means unusual: one finds the exact same self-positioning and representation in the work of the doyenne of the counter-jihadist genre, the "Eurabia" author Bat Ye'or or Gisèle Littman (Zia-Ebrahimi 2018, Bangstad 2019). The back cover also introduces the apocalyptic backdrop which is central to her polemic: in outsize red letters, potential readers are faced with the assertion that "Europe smoulders. Is our time past?" The text places the potential reader *in medias res* by declaring that:

Our freedom-oriented culture is facing an increasingly strong pressure from Islam. Islam is at war with women, Jews, homosexuals, freedom-loving Muslims and anyone unwilling to submit to its doctrines.

People are duly concerned about the future. Our political leadership is silent and lies about Islam's antagonism with freedom. [...]



In order to preserve our form of life, we need the people to voice their opposition.

We are herein introduced to an alarmist idea which comes quite close to a call to arms. Faced with a flood of strangers, from “the Middle-East, Africa, and Asia” (Storhaug 2015), “our” culture is under pressure from this unified entity, “Islam”. And what is at stake is “our” orientation towards “freedom”. Part of the *ethos* being established here is the speaker’s status as defender of “our” culture, “our” freedom, “our” way of life – against the alien other, and the elites: “Our political leadership”, which are not only “silent” about the dangers at hand, but also liars, deceivers. Central to the establishing of her *ethos* is, however, also the national imaginary she tries to establish through this version of Norwegian history:

Before the Reformation, before the Enlightenment and before the Fathers of the Nation worked out a free constitution at Eidsvoll in 1814, Norway was undeniably a country with traits reminiscent of Islamic countries of today, like Morocco, Iran, Pakistan and countries in the Middle East. Then the Norwegian people made a series of choices which in sum resulted in Norway transforming from a poor country on the outskirts of Europe, with a strong presence of suppression of women and a lacking respect for children, into one of the richest countries in the world, with a high level of popular participation, women and men alike. The political processes gave us a world-historical egalitarian society, in terms of the distribution of wealth and resources. But most importantly Norwegian men and women won the invaluable personal liberty. (14)

The links between these historical events are not too strong and they are not without their own ambiguities; the Reformation came to Norway from the outside, as a decision made by the Danish King Christian III, and is generally seen as the end of Norwegian autonomy as Norway then became a part of Denmark, as a kind of semi-colony. And it is not clear how this event relates to the “Enlightenment”, nor the writing of the Norwegian constitution in 1814, when Norway passed from Denmark to Sweden, now as part of a forced union. The Norwegian Constitution of 1814 in fact prohibited Jews and Jesuits from legal entry to Norway. The constitutional founding fathers in Norway who identified the most with the Enlightenment and the French revolution of 1789, were also among the strongest proponents of this particular article of the 1814 Constitution (Harket 2014). But the point of this rudimentary story is to establish the strange idea that Norway before the Reformation was “undeniably [...] reminiscent” of some “Islamic countries” of today, and that the “Norwegian people” through several conscious choices decided to change from cultures and countries with oppression and poverty into a liberal, egalitarian society, more than anything characterized by “personal liberty”. And what happened after this was that, in the 1970s, young men from Muslim countries started to come into the country, endangering the progress made during the preceding centuries. Storhaug’s

ethos, then, has historical grounding: she will defend Norway against the dangers of regression, of falling back into the “dark ages”. What Storhaug does in this paragraph is of course to engage in what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian describes as the “denial of co-evalness”, or the rhetorical placing of the Muslim and other racialized “Others” outside the “time of” Western modernity (Fabian 2014).

### **Logos: theology and critique of religion**

According to Aristotle *logos*, and above all the *enthymeme*, is “the body” of persuasion (Aristotle 1991, 34). The *enthymemem* is a shortened syllogism, typically where one of the premises is presupposed – but the important thing for us here is that the speaker will try to appear as speaking the truth, and presenting his or her case in a logical manner. Storhaug’s writings seem to present factual truths and to provide reasons. In her books, a lot of energy, and space, are spent on narratives with a mix of statistics and anecdotes. These may be demographic data (and projections) from European big cities, showing “alarmingly” high proportions of citizens with “immigrant” backgrounds, coupled with statistics on crime or poverty rates. The underlying (or sometimes quite explicit) premise, then, is that these statistics can only be “explained” by reference to the thing that these “facts” supposedly have in common: Islam.

Storhaug’s writings on Islam and immigration have been permeated by what Lentin and Titley have designated as “metonymical magic” (Lentin and Titley 2011, 54). Typically, this takes the form of addressing a problem or ill in society, connecting it to Muslims or Islam, and then concluding that it “stands for” Islam or Muslims as a whole. The part that stands for the whole in this manner can be (female) genital mutilation, honour killings, welfare fraud, corruption, domestic violence, or repression of homosexuals. Countless cases, mostly of an anecdotal nature, are referenced, and what connects them, the explanatory factor that they supposedly have in common is “Islam”. The textual effect, both within single sentences or paragraphs and the whole book, is that the meaning slides from being about “groups”, “some”, or “many” to “most” and by implication (almost) all Muslims. Muslims are referred to as a coherent group, and ascribed stereotypical characteristics which are explained by reference to what Storhaug sees as “the basic characteristics of Islam”. In her last book, however, there is an interesting shift in play in the sense that she tries to move away from this anecdotal and metonymic logic and instead invest in a more theological discourse. In addition to her long-standing inductive reasoning, she has shifted to a stronger emphasis on a specific, hyper-critical reading of Islam on a theological level, a critique which supposedly “proves” how problematic the presence of Muslims in “our” societies is, through the critique of religious texts.



There is a shift, then, in dominant mode taking place here – from induction to deduction, and in a sense, from metonymy to metaphor. There is still reliance on anecdotal evidence and induction, but in addition the argument seems to rest upon a reading of the faith of Islam as problematical, or even evil. Different quasi-theological arguments prove that Islam is anti-modern, oppressive, aggressive and so on, and from this can be deduced that Muslims pose a threat to Europe. Part of this argument is Storhaug's novel and artful distinction between something she refers to as "Medina-Islam" and "Mecca-Islam". This distinction, unknown as a meaningful distinction between practicing Muslims past and present and to any scholar of Islam, is credited to Hirsi Ali (Ali 2015). Hirsi Ali refers to "Medina Muslims" as Muslims who regard "the forcible imposition of sharia as their religious duty" (Ali 2015, 15) and "Mecca Muslims" as "Muslims who are loyal to the core creed and worship devoutly but are not inclined to practice violence" (16). The rhetorical function here is double: Firstly, the distinction between "Mecca"- and "Medina"-Islam clearly asserts that there is an innocent and benevolent Islam. There are in fact Mecca-Muslims, who worship peacefully in private and see their faith as something purely spiritual and non-political. Had all or most Muslims been of this kind, Storhaug states, her book would have been "completely superfluous" (Storhaug 2015, 119). So the distinction allows for the existence of a "good" Islam, adhered to by "good Muslims" as opposed to "bad" Islam and "bad Muslims" (Mamdani 2005). But the point is, secondly, to hammer in the main message, which is that "Medina"- Islam is in complete and total dominance, and that it has been so for one thousand four hundred years. This "religion of war and violence", which stands for suppression of women, homosexuals, free speech, independent thinking, science and enlightenment, has a "stronger and stronger influence on Muslims in Norway and Europe, also in secular surroundings" (120).

On a discursive level, however, the purpose of this shift towards a theological distinction between "Mecca" and "Medina" is to do away with the distinction between Islam and Islamism. In the introduction to the book Storhaug makes it clear that it "has become more and more impossible for [her] on the level of conscience" to operate with a distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamism as its fundamentalist, "totalitarian ideology [...] where law, politics, and theology is one and the same thing" (Storhaug 2015, 20). And her reason is both theological (that the Islam practiced by the Islamic prophet Muhammad in Medina, was for all practical purposes "Islamism") and empirical (that the majority of Muslims today are followers of "Medina-Islam"). Hence Islam is "Medina"- Islam, according to Storhaug, practiced from the Islamic prophet Muhammad himself during the last ten years of his life, and by almost all Muslims since, and the distinction between a faith called Islam and its modern derivation into Islamism is nothing but "wishful thinking". The fact that most Muslim citizens of Western countries today would

oppose this view is dealt with in two ways: 1) through a theory of dissimulation, which asserts that Muslims who differ, and claim that Islam has nothing to do with violence or oppression, are disingenuous, and that their dishonesty is religiously sanctioned, and 2) by asserting the authority of the Islamists themselves when demarcating what counts as “Islam” and what does not.

The latter point clearly testifies to the function of the “Medina-theory”, as Storhaug repeatedly states that it is the fundamentalists and terrorists who stand for the “correct” interpretation of Islam (see Storhaug 2015, 110–111, 120, 126–7, 167–8 or 305). She makes the startling claim that there are “probably few groups in recent history who have delved deeper into the sharia doctrines of Islam concerning girls and women than the The Islamic State” (167). ISIS, is, in other words, to Storhaug’s mind, in fact a privileged group of Muslim “thinkers” on this topic. Even more sinister, however, is her theory of dissimulation: if all Muslims are liars *no* Muslims are to be trusted. This theory is alarming and also conspiratorial because it represents an accusation one cannot defend oneself against: denial will be seen as confirmation. This line of reasoning is central to the book, since much space is spent undermining more secular-oriented and liberal Muslims and their spokespersons within media, culture and politics.

### **Conspiratory logos: “anti-elitism”**

Storhaug uses any number of far-right and counter-jihadist sources. They include Bat Ye’or [Gisèle Littman], Sylvain Besson, Robert Spencer, Helle Merete Brix and Lars Hedegaard of the Danish Free Press Society, the Swedish Democrat- and far-right aligned website Avpixlat, the Danish far-right website snaphanen.dk, Jihad Watch, the Gatestone Institute, Gates of Vienna, the Clarion Project and Daniel Pipes. Her use of the “Eurabia” author Bat Ye’or as a source is particularly revealing (Storhaug 2015, 192, footnote 349), in light of the fact that she made strenuous attempts at distancing herself from the highly conspiratorial and Islamophobic “Eurabia” genre (Zia-Ebrahimi 2018; Bangstad 2019) in the aftermath of Anders Behring Breivik’s terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya on 22 July 2011. In the aftermath of Breivik’s attacks it came to light that Storhaug and the HRS had for a number of years promoted the work of the far-right Norwegian blogger Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen aka “Fjordman” (Strømmen 2011). “Fjordman’s blog essays by Anders Behring Breivik’s own account provided his main inspiration, and was reproduced *in extenso* in Breivik’s cut-and-paste tract 2083: *A European Declaration of Independence*” (Jackson 2013). “Fjordman’s” essays were and remain profoundly inspired by the work of Ye’or. It was in fact the “Eurabia” author Bruce Bawer, employed by Storhaug’s HRS until 2011, who provided Fjordman’s introduction to Ye’or (see Bangstad 2014). After Breivik’s terrorist attacks, the HRS’ links with Fjordman and Bawer had become so embarrassing

for Storhaug that she now made the – in light of her actual record nonsensical claim that – she had “never been interested in the Eurabia theory” (Storhaug 2011).

The rhetorical strategy at work here is adopted straight out of the rule book of right-wing populist rhetoric, and is one that Ruth Wodak has characterized as “perpetrator-victim reversal” (Wodak 2015, 19). The target for Storhaug and the HRS’ “perpetrator-victim” reversal has in recent years increasingly been the liberal media in Norway, which Storhaug routinely refers to as “the MSM” or “Mainstream Media”. The underlying notion of there being a conspiracy between “liberal elites” in Norwegian mainstream media, mainstream Norwegian political party politicians and academia, aimed at promoting the interests of Islam and Muslims over and above those of Norwegians in general, is of course a variant of the “Eurabia” thesis.

The attacks on what Storhaug sees as “liberal elites” in society (media, politics, culture, clergy, education etc.) completely permeates her book.<sup>1</sup> The dominant trend in her critique of the elites is that they are and have been politically correct and extremely naïve. They suffer from what she calls “optophobia”, the fear of opening one’s eyes, in this case to the “real nature” of Islam. As far as this tendency goes she does not operate with an explicit conspiracy theory about collusion between Western elites and Arab/Muslim powers in “islamicizing” Europe. But she clearly believes in the same effect, and claims that a country like France is beyond redemption, that it has “reached a point of no return” (Storhaug 2015, 55). At times she also slides into even more conspiratorial waters, claiming that elites are “indoctrinating children and youth through political propaganda” (224–25) thereby concealing the imminent danger at hand.

### ***Pathos: fear of IslamLand***

In Storhaug’s essentialist conception, practicing Muslims are for all practical purposes determined by Islam, inhabiting the mythical place which Abu-Lughod has referred to as “IslamLand” (Abu-Lughod 2013, 69). In a rhetorical move familiar in far-right and Islamophobic circles in Europe in recent years, Storhaug is determined to characterize Islam not as a religion but as a political ideology. It is, the reader learns, “to the greatest extent the ideology of Muhammad” (Storhaug 2015, 136). The practical effect of characterizing Islam not as a religion or faith, but as a political ideology pure and simple, is of course to attempt to deprive Islam and Muslims of protections applicable to all recognized religious faiths and believers under international standards of protection for religious freedom (see Sullivan et al. 2015). It is only by invoking such Schmittian nationalist “sovereign exceptions” for Islam and Muslims under international law that Storhaug can argue consistently against the applicability of fundamental human rights relating to religious freedom for

Islam and Muslims, whilst at the same time purporting to represent a “human rights agenda”. From the front page of Norway’s most widely read liberal-conservative newspaper, *Aftenposten*, Storhaug in 2016 called for the prohibition of construction of new mosques in Norway, discriminatory treatment of Muslims whereby the hijab would be prohibited at all levels of the educational system in Norway, censoring violent suras in the Qur'an, and only permitting asylum for a small number of “freedom-oriented dissidents in opposition to Islamic fundamentalism” in Norway (Stokke and Ruud 2016). In 2018, Storhaug declared her enthusiasm for authoritarian Eastern European nationalist leaders in the Visegrad Four countries and endorsed political proposals in Czechia to completely prohibit Islamic practice (Storhaug 2018).

For Storhaug to distinguish between Islam and the modern political ideology of Islamism, is “an intellectual or ideological exercise in theoretization” (Storhaug 2015, 20). Storhaug declares herself to be “un-interested” in “placing myself in good circles” (20) by distinguishing between Islam and Islamism. For according to Storhaug, “Islam as an overriding totalitarian order of society was already established by Islam’s founder Muhammad in the seventh century in the Arab town of Medina” (20). It is consequently, according to Storhaug, “meaningless to postulate that” it was not “the *ideology* of the politically totalitarian *Islamism*” that “Muhammad practiced when he had all powers over the people he had conquered” (20; emphases in Storhaug’s original). Islam is according to Storhaug a “totalitarian ideology with prominent anti-modern features” (Storhaug 2015, 13). Islam is also in Storhaug’s interpretation as a political ideology trans-historical and not shaped by social, political or historical contexts. For it is only thus that a statement to the effect that “an unreformed religion with roots in the Arab desert sands in the 6th century has gained a foothold in Norway” (13) can be understood. The threat it represents is according to Storhaug the threat of a “rupture with developments in Norwegian society ever since the Reformation and the Enlightenment” which threatens to return Norwegians to “features in our own Medieval Ages”, characterized by

religious dictatorship and submission of women, the absence of democracy, sharp divides between the people and the governed, deep and violent conflicts, and last, but not least, in the long run a society in which a majority of the population lives in poverty. (13)

Though Storhaug is by her own admission not a practicing Christian, she knows a great deal about how appeals to “Christianist secularism” (Brubakers 2016) resonates on a popular level in a country like Norway.

Storhaug furthermore introduces her polemic by reference to Norwegian salafi-jihadi sympathizers who ended up as “foreign fighter” recruits for the terrorist organization ISIS in Syria and Iraq after the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2012. The Norwegian Police Security Services (PST) has estimated

that a hundred Norwegians of Muslim background have travelled to Syria and Iraq as “foreign fighters” for various salafi-jihadi organizations since 2012; forty of these are believed to still be alive and living in Syria or Iraq.

Over the first few pages, she then seamlessly proceeds to a characterization of a 2015 book about arranged marriages written by the Norwegian-Pakistani wife of the current secretary-general of the Sunni-dominated Muslim umbrella organization the Islamic Council of Norway (Islamisk Råd Norge) to a reference to a proposed visit by the Qatari-based Egyptian-born and Muslim Brothers- aligned sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi announced by an Jordanian-Norwegian imam of the largest Arab-speaking mosque in Oslo, Norway in 2011 (the visit never materialized). The intended effect of this interweaving of disparate and completely unconnected events on Storhaug’s part is of course to generate the impression that these are tied together: “Several different events, at several different places. Is there a common denominator? The common denominator is Islam”. For Storhaug, much as for Hirsi Ali, Islam is quintessentially about terrorism and violent jihad.

Where serious academic historians have tended to describe relations between “Islam” and “the West” as historically contingent and shifting – not least in Europe – Storhaug, describes these one thousand four hundred years as a series of ceaseless “Islamic” attempts at domination through jihad. “We are now in the third jihad against Europe”, Storhaug writes ominously: “We are in the midst of a new civilizational struggle, the most dramatic since the 1930s” (Storhaug 2015, 25). In the context of the series of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks that European countries experienced from 2015 to 2017, Storhaug was quick to turn up the volume: citing no credible sources, in 2017 she claimed to be in possession of evidence of “an army of 70 000 religious soldiers” in “only four European countries” (Germany, France, Great Britain and Belgium) “prepared for jihad and terror against us” (Storhaug 2017a). Storhaug clearly implied that voting for the opposition social democrats of the Labour Party in Norway in the parliamentary elections in 2017 would in effect be to align oneself with salafi-jihadist terrorists. This spurious interlinking of Norwegian social democrats and salafi-jihadists was central to the rhetoric of the Norwegian right-wing extremist terrorist Anders Behring Breivik in 2011 (Bangstad 2014), and would re-appear in a Facebook post from the far-right Norwegian Minister of Justice Sylvi Listhaug of the governing Progress Party in January 2018, which led to her being forced to resign by a majority in the Norwegian Parliament, the Storting, in March 2018 (Engelstad 2018). In the aftermath of a terrorist attack in in Barcelona in 2017, Storhaug’s alleged Muslim “religious army” of 70 000 had all of a sudden increased to 100 000, and Storhaug was openly advocating the “re-evaluating” [read: setting aside] of “human rights and international conventions” which only “contribute to the murder of innocent people” and the internment and

deportation of 100 000 “potential jihadis to their countries of origin” (Storhaug 2017b).

Apocalyptic visions also abound in Storhaug’s 2015 book, which informs the readers that Marseille is already a “lost city” due to the number of Muslim residents, and that France has “already reached a point of no return” (Storhaug 2015, 55). She then travels on to Sweden and the city of Malmö, from which she is able to report on an alleged “war that has already reached our Swedish neighbours” (62). Sweden also has what Storhaug in line with far-right rhetorical tropes describes as “lost territories” (63). The Swedish public sphere “has completely broken down” and Sweden is a “semi-totalitarian society” in which “the ideological elite uses its power to control the debate” about immigration (66). Child marriages among Muslims are said to be “flourishing in Sweden” (161), and Swedish police are represented as being powerless in Muslim and immigrant-dominated Swedish neighbourhoods.

## The question of racism

Denials of racism are of course standard from writers like Storhaug. To her, she states, “racism is completely intolerable, and must be opposed through all legitimate means” (Storhaug 2015, 312). Her many denials of racism typically play on a “pretense of censorship” (Van Dijk 1992, 105), claiming that the concept of Islamophobia, and accusations of racism in general, are attempts to “censor” and “silence” her. Therefore, her books always contain a few examples of “good” Muslims – to show that she does not denounce all Muslims as such. But “good Muslims” are in Storhaug’s writings only exceptions to the rule – they are rare specimens of an almost non-existent species. Hence, the disclaimers in the book typically take this form: “There are, without a doubt, many tolerant Muslims, but Islam is in its fundamental tenets intolerant” (Storhaug 2015, 23). Storhaug repeatedly states that mainstream Islam is “Medina-Islam”, and the overwhelming majority of Muslims alive today are “Medina-Muslims”, enemies of every Western freedom and liberty, against tolerance and democracy and latently in support of violence against “us”, the unbelievers. The core message in the book is that Islam represents a direct threat to “our” values, societies and way of life.

This essentializing of Islam and Muslims as enemies, endangering Western civilization, becomes clearly racist also through Storhaug’s insistence on a theory of dissimulation. Her idea of Islam rests on a view of all non-believers as inferior enemies to be conquered and reduced to the status of “dhimmi” (Storhaug 2015, 189). Hence it is not only allowed, but “almost recommended” to “deceive and lie to infidels” (192). This is a racist theory in the sense that it presupposes that the “other” is an enemy, and that he/she will tell lies if deemed profitable. Any minority subjected to this theory will be unable to



defend themselves rationally, since every statement uttered by them must be untrue.

Furthermore, even though Storhaug mostly limits herself to cultural racism directed at Muslims, the co-imbrication between biological and cultural racism is readily apparent in the rhetorical slippages in Storhaug's 2015 polemic. Here, she describes herself as "a woman and a member of the white race" (Storhaug 2015, 32), and provides the following thoroughly racialized and sexualized description of a French-Somali interlocutor she encounters in Marseille:

"The narrow face and the accompanying long narrow nose; high cheekbones, high forehead and a bronze skin. Classical Somali ... in front of me was the perfect medium distance runner. Height of around 1,80 meters, long slim, muscular thighs, and at the top of those thighs, a round ass". (42)

The rhetoric of Storhaug's book is not built on a theory of biological race, but the fact that race so to speak pops up from time to time, almost as "Freudian slips" speaks volumes. The most important function is that these instances smuggle in an opposition between "us" and "them" which is also racial: Part of the fear and alarm characteristic of the descriptions from Marseille or Malmö is based on skin colour and other racial characteristics. It is inherently wrong, it would seem, that she as a "member of the white race" should feel alienated in any part of Europe. The people she reports seeing in the streets of these cities are European citizens, and that seems to be the problem.<sup>2</sup>

### Conclusion: the ethos, logos and pathos of Hege Storhaug's Islamophobia

Stanley argues that "... in a democracy, propaganda of the demagogic variety will characteristically be presented as the embodiment of democratic ideals" (Stanley 2015, 81, 79). The democratic ideals that Storhaug and the HRS have over the years embodied are those of feminism and human rights; purportedly universal ideals, but weaponized as potent instruments of exclusion, targeting Norwegian and European Muslims. These positive, and "universal" ideals are important in Storhaug's version of Islamophobia, also in the sense that they contribute to all the rhetorical aspects we have focused on in this article. They contribute to her *ethos*, as one who is "only" out to defend enlightenment values of universal human rights. They also contribute to her *ethos* through a spurious theory of historical progress, as we have seen. According to her theory of history, Western societies in general, and the Norwegian in particular, have progressed from an oppressive and primitive state, to a modern, progressive and wealthy state through the struggle for specific values. She, then, defends a fight for progress, against forces of

regression – embodied by Muslims and the religion of Islam. In this construction of her *ethos* there is also an important, implicit and explicit, attempt to construct a connection or line back to the “Norwegian” struggle against Nazi rule and German occupation during WWII.

These universal “democratic” ideals are also important in her *logos*, through the claims of Islam being anti-democratic, and incommensurable with a modern, secular state. New to her latest book is the attempt to make this argument also on the theological level; through a more deductive argument going from Islamic theology to “all” (or most) Muslims as a problem, or an alien presence in the body politic. And the thrust of the whole book lies in the evocation of feelings (*pathos*) of fear: “we” should all fear this alien other, and the reason not all of us share her fears is deception; people have to wake up and liberate themselves from the “optophobia” characteristic of (and produced by) the elites of the media, politics, culture etc. In this sense it is clear enough that her polemic has an underlying undemocratic and anti-universalist core, even as it speaks in the name of democracy and universal values.

## Notes

1. See Storhaug (2015, 22, 24, 28, 31, 65–68, 86–112, 115, 116, 131, 174, 197, 224, 248, 249, 255, 262, 270, 275, 276, 299, 303, 307, 314, 318, 320, and 325) for the most obvious cases.
2. Storhaug’s HRS has also on several occasions on rights.no published racist posts by a Swedish blogger known as “Julia Caesar” arguing that mass migration of people from Africa means “importing tens of thousands of mentally retarded persons” [sic] (Caesar 2011).

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