



THE NETHERLANDS

Quick Facts

Population: 10,248,069

Area: 89,342 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 98%, Circassian 1%, Armenian 1%

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$40.49 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Netherlands has been a country renowned for its religious tolerance. In the Golden Age of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Republic of the United Provinces served as a haven for Jews and Protestants fleeing persecution in other parts of Europe. Muslim immigrants began to join their ranks in the late 19th century. Decades later, as it sought cheap labor during the 1960s, the Dutch government actively encouraged immigration from Indonesia and Suriname, both Muslim-majority countries and former Dutch colonies. Such days, however, have long since passed; ideological conflicts abroad now serve as magnets for aspiring Dutch jihadists, while xenophobia, the refugee crisis, and the looming threat of Islamic terrorism have driven the adoption of increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum policies. Despite Dutch efforts to proactively counter radicalization and encourage integration, this social transformation has allowed Islamists to push the political envelope and expose a values gap between the Dutch majority and its immigrant Muslim population.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

As in many European countries, the Netherland's current primary concern regarding Islamist activity is the foreign fighter phenomenon. Since March 2013, the Office of the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) has tracked increasing radicalization among Dutch youth and a willingness to become "jihadi travelers:" men and women who leave the Netherlands to fight in foreign conflicts. NCTV's chief Dick Schoof has warned that, in turn, the experiences of these individuals on the battlefield is likely to make them "highly radicalized, traumatized and with a strong desire to commit violence, thus posing a significant threat to this country"¹ upon their return. Homegrown radical rhetorical movements like Behind Bars, Street Daw'ah, and Shariah4Holland have transformed into actual jihadist networks, sending core members abroad to fight, while a wider group of supporters at home supports their efforts with propaganda, hate crimes, and public demonstrations that, according to the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), "encourage anti-democratic and intolerant values... creating a

climate in which the use of violence becomes more acceptable.”²² These trends have prompted the NCTV to maintain an elevated “substantial” (Level 4 of 5) threat assessment since 2013.

Reports of terrorist financing activities and the dissemination of jihadist propaganda in support of al-Shabaab³ indicates that Somalia may be a destination for some Dutch foreign fighters. However, the Middle East is the greater magnet: roughly 285 Dutch citizens are known to have joined extremist causes in Syria and Iraq. Of that number, 55 have been killed—five as suicide bombers—and roughly 50 have returned.⁴ With the recapture of most ISIS-controlled territory, the AIVD expects the number of returnees to increase significantly in the coming year.⁵ These battle-hardened returnees (including an increasing number of women and children)⁶ may be more open to attacks either directed or inspired by ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other jihadist organizations. An online ISIS call for a terror attack on Utrecht’s stadium during the 2017 European women’s soccer championships confirms that the Netherlands remains on the radar of jihadist groups,⁷ likely due to its involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition.⁸ Moreover, throughout 2017, the NCTV warned of a higher probability of a terrorist attack after investigations discovered an increase in the number of cross-border ISIS networks along with caches of arms and ammunition.⁹ The results of the Pew Research Center’s Spring 2017 Global Attitudes survey reported that 67% of Dutch citizens consider ISIS to be the top threat facing the country.¹⁰

Beyond the criminal foreign fighter threat, other legal Islamist organizations in the Netherlands represent causes for concern, chief among them the Dutch Salafist movement. The NCTV differentiates Salafist doctrine into three “strands:” apolitical Salafism, which encourages da’wa (proselytization) and isolation from non-Muslim society; political Salafism, which promotes engagement in society in order to advance the group’s specific religious objectives; and jihadi Salafism, undoubtedly the most extreme of the three, as it glorifies violence against non-believers.¹¹ While the risks posed by jihadi Salafism are much greater and more immediate than those of the other two strands, the AIVD’s 2017 annual report nevertheless expressed alarm with the overall movement’s use of intimidation, intolerance, and deliberate polarization as well as its potential role as a recipient of unsavory foreign financing.¹² The NCTV concurred, warning that even da’wa (proselytization) undermines the democratic legal order, endorsing discrimination against outsiders and suppressing forms of dissent against the doctrine.¹³

Despite the doctrine’s anti-democratic nature, liberal Dutch religious freedom laws allowed Salafism to grow largely unhindered from the mid-1980s through the early 2000s.¹⁴ Ideological momentum appeared to slow briefly in the face of government and civilian (both Muslim and non-Muslim) opposition; after the 2004 murder of film director Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch government increased its pressure on Salafi centers that served as potential sites of radicalization, even deporting imams of the al-Fourkaan mosque whose proselytization was dangerous enough for the government to declare them *personae non grata*.¹⁵ However, the movement began gaining strength again in 2014 as Dutch Salafists responded to heightened interest driven by the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa with new recruiting tactics.¹⁶ Savvy social media use and a new generation of traveling Salafi preachers, typically Netherlands natives who preach in Dutch, have expanded the movement’s access to a greater number of potential converts. While they espouse expansion of the faith among non-practicing Muslims rather than violence and jihad,¹⁷ the AIVD notes that even these da’wa organizations “have again hardened their tone after a period of relative moderation, becoming more anti-integration, intolerantly isolationist and hostile to any form of dissenting thought.”¹⁸

Key Salafist institutions include the el-Tawheed mosque in Amsterdam, the al-Fourkaan mosque in Eindhoven, the as-Sunnah mosque in The Hague, and the Islamic Foundation for Education and Transmission of Knowledge (ISOOK) in Tilburg.¹⁹ Of these, the al-Fourkaan mosque is the oldest, and the number of prominent orthodox Muslim leaders that it has produced (including Ahmad Salam, considered by many to be the most influential Salafi preacher in the Netherlands) is a sign of its influence. However, the mosque has also been linked to a number of individuals who have gone on to commit violent acts,

including at least three of the 9/11 hijackers,²⁰ foreign fighters in Kashmir,²¹ and rumored funders of al-Qaeda.²² The AIVD remains wary of this web of al-Fourkaan associations and continues to track them in annual dossiers and reports while advising the mosque to be cautious when issuing invitations to guests. In December 2015, for example, acting on NCTV guidance, Eindhoven mayor Rob van Gijzel barred seven controversial imams from speaking at the mosque because of their past glorification of violence committed in the name of Islam.²³

The Muslim Brotherhood is active in the Netherlands, but much less so than in other European states. In the early 2000s, the AIVD cautioned that the Brotherhood's attempted engagement with Dutch policy leaders, politicians, academics, and other public figures masked an "ultimate aim—although never stated openly—to create, then implant and expand, an ultra-Orthodox Muslim bloc inside Western Europe."²⁴ However, the fact that the Brotherhood has not been mentioned in any AIVD public reporting from the last decade suggests that their influence is too low to be a significant cause for concern.²⁵

Other international Islamist groups may appeal to particular Muslim minority communities residing in the Netherlands because of their ties to specific ethnicities or embrace of nationalist causes. The main concern about such groups is that they threaten peaceful integration of these minorities into their host culture. A prime example is the schools and followers of Turkish scholar Fethullah Gülen. A 2008 investigation into the movement's presence in the Netherlands found that Gülen-inspired schools promoted "anti-integrative behavior," and in response the government significantly reduced the level of funding it had previously provided to the movement.²⁶ Nonetheless, Gülenism continues to arouse suspicions and foster antagonism even among different elements of the Dutch Turkish community: after the failed Turkish military coup of July 2016, which Ankara alleges was masterminded by Gülen, a Turkish state news organization published a controversial list of all Gülen-affiliated organizations and individuals in the Netherlands. The Dutch government angrily denounced this foreign interference in their domestic affairs, but many concerned parents withdrew their children from the "Gülen-list" schools, resulting in a 20 percent loss to the collective student body.²⁷

Similarly, the Moroccan Arrahmane mosque in Amsterdam is the headquarters of the Dutch branch of Tablighi Jama'at. Although Tablighi Jama'at is in principle an apolitical movement, the Dutch authorities have expressed concern that its ideology may further the "social isolation and radicalization" of vulnerable elements within the Moroccan immigrant community.²⁸ Internationally, in recent years, the movement has increasingly come to be seen as an incubator for aspiring terrorists. Many European recruits are rumored to have used Tablighi connections as a pathway into Pakistan, where they then disappeared into the jihadi training camps of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.²⁹

Finally, the radical pan-Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir also maintains a small presence in the Netherlands. Although the number of its followers is believed to be in the low hundreds, the NCTV's 2016 threat assessments note increased cooperation between Hizb ut-Tahrir and various Salafist organizations, in spite of their ideological differences, driven in part by the elevated tension in the general public discourse over Islam.³⁰

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of 2016 (the latest such data available), the Pew Research Center estimated that the 1.2 million Muslims in the Netherlands account for 7.1% of the total population.³¹ The two largest demographics within this population are Turks (approximately 37 percent of the total Muslim population) and Moroccans (roughly 36 percent).³² Other large Muslims communities come from Syria, Suriname, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, and Iran.³³ Several thousand native Dutch converts and children of second-generation Muslim immigrants comprise the last piece of the multifaceted Dutch Muslim community.³⁴

According to one assessment of Islam in the Netherlands, "whereas today many of the Dutch majority population support the idea of migrants adopting Dutch norms and values, the migrants themselves aspire

to a combination of independent cultural development.³⁵ While it is certainly possible to debate the truth of this statement, there are several other important factors that create a gap between Muslim immigrant communities and the rest of Dutch society. The average age of the Muslim population is much lower than that of the country in general, at 25 years of age for Muslims and 38 for non-Muslims.³⁶ This age gap, taken in combination with discrepancies in levels of education achieved and language ability, poses a challenge to the seamless integration sought by the Dutch authorities, potentially even increasing the sentiments of disaffection and alienation that can lead to radicalization. The diverse nature of the Muslim community has also prevented any kind of large-scale, viable political movement from forming in support of its varied interests and concerns.³⁷

At 2.4% of the country's overall population,³⁸ Turks make up the largest Muslim community in the Netherlands, and the infrastructure that exists to support them is quite sizable. The main Muslim organizations within the Turkish community belong to mosques under the control of the Diyanet (the Turkish religious affairs directorate in Ankara) or to the non-governmental Milli Görüs movement, which is headquartered in Cologne, Germany.³⁹ This directorate maintains significant power over its diaspora community in the Netherlands, including the right to appoint imams for Diyanet-controlled mosques,⁴⁰ although all imams are required by the Dutch government to take a year-long "integration course" before they are permitted to practice in the country.⁴¹ Diyanet operates through two larger umbrella organizations: the Turkish Islamic Cultural Foundation (TICF, founded in 1979) and the Dutch Islamic Foundation (ISN, founded 1982).⁴² Diyanet mosques are heavily influenced by the course of the Turkish government; for example, Ankara's increasingly Islamist stance in recent years may be tied to the parallel increase in Salafism among the Turkish communities in the Netherlands.⁴³ Traditionally, the government-controlled official nature of Diyanet has kept it distinct from Milli Görüs. For decades, in fact, the Turkish government was openly hostile to the group, suspicious of the multiple Islamist parties that sprang up in its wake.

Moroccans constitute the second-largest Muslim community in the Netherlands, controlling a full 40 percent of all Dutch mosques.⁴⁴ Although the majority of Moroccan immigrants appear to have integrated well into Dutch society, the demographic is disproportionately represented in the government's threat assessments of potential jihadists. AIVD's 2014 and 2015 reports affirmed that the majority of Dutch foreign fighters in Syria are also Moroccan.⁴⁵ There has been a corresponding increase in angry public rhetoric and anti-Moroccan discrimination,⁴⁶ in one particularly high-profile example, Geert Wilders, the leader of the nationalist *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom, or PVV), started a chant at a rally calling for "fewer Moroccans" in the country.

The Syrian conflict has catalyzed changing attitudes among many Dutch citizens as the wave of refugees seeking asylum in the EU brings the conflict closer to home. At the EU Migration Summit in 2015, the Netherlands agreed to accept over the course of two years an additional 7,000 resettled asylum seekers who had originally arrived elsewhere in Europe.⁴⁷ The Dutch government has since stated that Syrian asylum seekers represented nearly half of all the arrived refugees in the Netherlands that year (approximately 27,700 out of a total 58,880).⁴⁸ As the November 2015 attacks in Paris made clear, foreign fighters en route to Europe from Syria could easily take advantage of the chaos caused by the refugee crisis to return unnoticed.

Consequently, the famous Dutch tolerance has decreased and been replaced by rising xenophobia in the wake of the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis. In September 2016, the Pew Research Center reported that 61 percent of Dutch citizens think that refugees will increase terrorism in the country; in the same poll, a full third of Dutch respondents said that growing diversity made the Netherlands a worse place to live.⁴⁹ As is the case across Western Europe, the presence of large Muslim communities and questions of integration have clearly provoked sentiments of unease and fear among neighbors who blame multiculturalism for increased violence and other social ills.⁵⁰ Indeed, the AIVD has noted how radical elements may attempt to exploit these sentiments:

...the Islamists involved are indeed aware of the “favorable” polarizing effect of Islamist-inspired violent activities. Such violent activities promote the prejudices of the Dutch population about all Muslims. As a result thereof, Muslims also increasingly get the idea that they are alienated from the Dutch society and the chance that they become susceptible to radical ideas becomes bigger.⁵¹

The NCTV assesses that this polarized climate poses a concrete risk to Dutch society, as it may contribute to the radicalization of a lone wolf actor or small domestic cells—either from would-be jihadists or from anti-Muslim extremist groups.⁵²

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

As attacks in Paris, Brussels, and Istanbul rocked Europe in 2014 and 2015, the Dutch government proactively took steps to lead anti-extremist efforts on the continent while simultaneously strengthening counterterrorism legislation and border security measures. The Netherlands serves as a member of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, conducting airstrikes on behalf of the coalition, and maintaining a liaison in U.S. Central Command. Amsterdam also recognizes the importance of travel intervention in keeping foreign fighters from leaving its territory. In 2017, the Dutch government adopted legislation that allows for harsh administrative sanctions linked to citizenship and freedom of movement, permitting: the revocation or withdrawal of a dual citizen’s Dutch nationality if he or she is deemed to have joined a terrorist organization; the imposition of a travel ban on individuals whose intention in traveling poses a threat to national security (i.e., aspiring foreign fighters); and the immediate expiration of the passport for anyone who is the subject of a travel ban.⁵³ Notably, these penalties can be imposed even without prior criminal convictions for the individual under suspicion.

The government’s second strategic goal is to isolate radicals, empower the voices of moderate Muslims, and strengthen the bonds between Muslim immigrants and the Dutch democratic political system and society.⁵⁴ The Netherlands helps lead the European Commission-sponsored Radicalisation Awareness Network and its Centre of Excellence, and it has championed EU efforts to develop protocols to counter terrorism financing. In August 2014, it began implementation of a Comprehensive Action Programme to Combat Jihadism, intended to “protect the democratic state under the rule of law, to counter and weaken the jihadist movement in the Netherlands and to eliminate the breeding ground for radicalization.⁵⁵ Among the important tactics introduced in this program are: an increase in administrative measures to block and disrupt radical imams and propagandists; the creation of support networks for those concerned or affected by the perceived radicalization of a loved one; the establishment of a center to monitor social tensions and radicalization; and the formation of an infrastructure to guide the dissemination of narratives and views that counter Islamist doctrine and promote the rule of law.

Another important tenet of the program is its emphasis on combating radicals online. By recognizing the power of social media as a recruiting and dissemination tool, the government is responding with new measures to identify and sanction online producers of propaganda, work with internet companies to proactively dismantle any sites or users violating terms of use agreements, and manage a hotline for citizens to report any online content inciting hatred or promoting violence.

The NCTV is responsible for the implementation of the Programme. The NCTV was born out of the muddled European response to the 2004 Madrid train bombings, at which point the Dutch government realized the dire need to patch the holes in its own counterterror infrastructure. In keeping with its mission “to minimize the risk of terrorist attacks in the Netherlands and to take prior measures to limit the potential impact of terrorist acts,”⁵⁶ the NCTV has since focused on the issue of counter-radicalization, launching a joint government and law enforcement operation to “disrupt” the work of the main Salafi centers in the Netherlands.⁵⁷ The Dutch counter-radicalization approach focuses both on Islamic fundamentalists and

right-wing nationalists, since racially-motivated attacks against Muslims (as occurred increasingly after Van Gogh's murder in 2004) can spike hate crimes and deepen feelings of alienation and anger.⁵⁸

This preventative outlook in the current European security environment demonstrate the Dutch government's continued adherence to its so-called "broad approach" to countering radicalization.⁵⁹ It is grounded on the idea that "no one is born a terrorist, but first goes through a short or longer process of radicalization before he or she decides to risk the life of other and his or her own for a political objective."⁶⁰ Funds allocated for this program support the goal of cooperation with Muslim communities by stimulating partnership and reducing the appeal of Islamist narratives through counter-messaging. As explicitly delineated in the Comprehensive Action Programme, law enforcement authorities are encouraged to pursue partnership with moderate mosques and imams to negate the polarization pushed by radical elements. At the same time, the government incentivizes integration by Muslim community leaders and individuals. For instance, while the government provides educational subsidies for the training of imams at Dutch universities, each participant in the program must first complete a yearlong "integration course" to familiarize themselves with local communities and customs.⁶¹ Law enforcement officials and social workers familiar with local conditions in various towns and villages are designated as official points of contact in such approaches. Skeptics, however, have long derided the utility of the broad approach, given that it oversimplifies the motivations for at-risk individuals, may spark resentment among moderate Muslims, and has little effect on the low-profile, small study groups where such radicalization often occurs.⁶² A justice ministry inspection in 2017 assessed that roughly half of all Dutch local councils (mostly in towns of 100,000 or fewer) so far have taken no action to institute programs,⁶³ indicating that the policy has yet to take root in small areas and will likely require greater top-down direction if it is to be effective.

At times, the narrative of the looming threat posed by potential radicals gains more ground than that of the government's constructive attempts to head it off, particularly in debates over immigration and asylum. This trend largely began at the turn of this century when the "leader of the Dutch new right" Pim Fortuyn spearheaded a campaign to restrict Dutch immigration and asylum policies.⁶⁴ Fortuyn was known not only for his aggressive stance against militant Islam, but also for a hardline belief that Dutch borders must be closed to any further Muslim immigration because Islamic values clashed irreconcilably with the permissive Dutch society.⁶⁵ After Fortuyn's murder in 2003 by a radical activist (whose motive was reportedly to stop the scapegoating of Dutch Muslims for society's problems),⁶⁶ his political mantle was quickly assumed by Geert Wilders, head of the Freedom Party (PVV). Wilders was initially able to leverage his party's crucial position in the ruling Center-right coalition to push the conversation on his priority issues and controversial proposals: stricter regulations on immigration, outlawing the burqa and the niqab, and a ban on dual nationality (which is held by an estimated 1.5 to 2 million Dutch citizens).⁶⁷ Like Fortuyn, Wilders makes no secret of his personal views of the threat that Islam poses to Dutch society and to the West, and he has faced legal action for this position. His December 2016 conviction for inciting discrimination against the Netherlands' Moroccan minority did not hurt his party's image;⁶⁸ rather, the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation reported increased support for the PVV, due in part to the fact that many Dutch citizens believed it was unfair that Wilders had been tried at all.⁶⁹

From the low point of 2013, when the party lost 9 seats⁷⁰ in the parliamentary elections and faced significant pushback from activists opposed to the ruling coalition's restrictive immigration policy, the PVV has managed an astonishing comeback. Populist sentiments in the lead-up to the United Kingdom's 2016 Brexit vote strengthened the hand of the PVV and its ability to advance Wilders' cherished initiatives. In November 2016, for example, 132 of the 150 members of Parliament voted to outlaw wearing the niqab in schools, hospitals, government buildings, and other public places.⁷¹ Other items on Wilders' contentious party manifesto included proposals to close all Islamic schools and mosques, ban the Koran and the wearing of headscarves, and halt all immigration from Islamic countries in pursuit of complete

“de-Islamization” of the Netherlands.⁷² In the 2017 parliamentary elections, this platform won the PVV twenty seats—a gain of five but still falling short of the thirty that Wilders had desired, putting it in second place in the vote count behind Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s Liberal party.⁷³ Yet Wilders continues to play the role of spoiler. It took the Liberal Party a record 208 days to form a government⁷⁴ by patching together a coalition with three other parties whose main uniting theme was that they were “anti-Wilders.”⁷⁵ This fractured leadership validates Wilders’ image as the only alternative to an elite establishment willing to turn a blind eye to the existential threat to Dutch society that the PVV portrays Islam to be.⁷⁶ Under Wilders’ leadership, the PVV will continue to further polarize Parliament and the public debate, spreading an ideology that undermines the government’s counter-radicalization approach.

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