



THE NETHERLANDS

QUICK FACTS

Population: 17,280,397 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 89,342 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Dutch 76.9%, EU 6.4%, Turkish 2.4%, Moroccan 2.3%, Indonesian 2.1%, German 2.1%, Surinamese 2%, Polish 1%, other 4.8% (2018 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$832.2 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated November 2020)

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Netherlands has been 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 joined their ranks in the late 19th century. Decades later, as it sought cheap labor during the 1960s, the Dutch government 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 of recent years, 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, exposing a values gap between the Dutch majority and its immigrant Muslim population and fomenting an ominous trend of polarization.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

As in many European countries, the foreign fighter problem is a pressing concern in the Netherlands. In March 2013, the Office of the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) began tracking Dutch youth radicalization and a willingness to become “*jihadi* travelers”: men and women who leave the Netherlands to fight in foreign conflicts. Reports of terrorist financing activities and *jihadist* propaganda in support of al-Shabaab indicates that Somalia may be a destination for some Dutch foreign fighters.¹ However, the Middle East is the greater magnet for foreign fighters.

For a time, the Netherlands ranked seventh among EU member states in the number of foreign fighters traveling to fight in Syria and Iraq. Homegrown radical Dutch rhetorical movements like Behind Bars, Street *Daw’ah*, and Shariah4Holland transformed themselves into actual *jihadist* networks. Meanwhile, a wider group of domestic supporters boosted 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.”² These trends have prompted the NCTV to maintain a continued and elevated “substantial” (Level 4 of 5) threat assessment since 2013.

The contours of this phenomenon have shifted somewhat in the last two years. The recent loss of ISIS’ territorial *caliphate* has made fighting for it less appealing, and no Dutch nationals are known to have departed for the conflict since June 2017.³ Instead, the Netherlands must manage returning foreign fighters and the family members (often children) who accompanied them abroad.⁴ Of the roughly 300 Dutch citizens known to have joined extremist causes in Syria and Iraq, 85 have been killed—five as suicide bombers—and roughly 55 have returned.⁵ NCTV’s former chief, Dick Schoof, has warned that individual battlefield experiences was likely to make them “highly radicalized, traumatized and with a strong desire to commit violence, thus posing a significant threat to this country” upon their return.⁶ As of this writing, at least seven of the returnees have been convicted on criminal charges, with another eight currently being prosecuted.⁷

It appears that these battle-hardened returnees may be more open to attacks either directed or inspired by ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other *jihadi* organizations despite what initial analysis suggested.⁸ Indeed, after the 2018 apprehension of seven men plotting an attack in Arnhem, an NCTV spokesman warned that “the size of the cell is striking. A terrorist homegrown cell of this size with an ambitious plan of attack has not occurred in the Netherlands since 2006.”⁹ Other signals point to continued *jihadi* interest in staging attacks in the Netherlands – including an online ISIS call for a terror attack on Utrecht’s stadium during the 2017 European women’s soccer championships and an increase in the number of cross-border ISIS networks along with caches of arms and ammunition.¹⁰ As the NCTV continues to assess a higher probability of a domestic terrorist attack, the Pew Research Center’s Spring 2017 Global Attitudes survey confirmed that 67% of Dutch citizens consider ISIS to be the top threat facing the country.¹¹

The Dutch Salafist movement bridges the gap between criminal *jihadi* activities and radical but legal Islamism in the Netherlands. In its September 2018 threat assessment, the NCTV noted that the *jihadi* movement is reorienting itself homeward and, lacking opportunities to fight abroad, “is once again fully engaged in *dawa* (proselytization) activities” that characterize the non-violent branch of the movement.¹² The NCTV differentiates Salafist doctrine into three “strands:” apolitical Salafism, which encourages *dawa* (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.¹³

While the risks posed by *jihadi* Salafism are greater and more immediate than those of the other two strands, the AIVD’s 2017 annual report expresses alarm with the overall movement’s use of intimidation, active intolerance, and deliberate polarization as well as its role as a potential recipient of unsavory foreign financing.¹⁴ The NCTV concurred, warning that even *dawa* undermines the democratic legal order, endorsing discrimination against outsiders and suppressing forms of dissent.¹⁵ Moreover, the NCTV has identified intermingled *jihadi* and Salafism as increasingly influential; it notes that proselyte organizations provide logical cover for would-be *jihadists* to move, recruit, and operate without revealing their true nature.¹⁶

Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa have undeniably strengthened the Dutch Salafist movement in the last decade.¹⁷ Heightened interest in the ideology has prompted political Salafists to adapt and modernize their recruiting tactics.¹⁸ Savvy social media use and a new generation of traveling Salafi preachers preaching in Dutch have since expanded the movement’s access to a greater number of potential converts.¹⁹ While they espouse expansion of the faith among non-practicing Muslims rather than violence and *jihad*, the AIVD notes that these *dawa* 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.”²⁰ They may be attractive to foreign funders – in April 2018, English-language publication *The NL Times* claimed to have seen a confidential NCTV memo confirming that the number of Salafist mosques has doubled in the preceding four years, from 13 to 27, thanks to obscure Gulf State funding channels.²¹

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.²² 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. These mosques have also been linked to a number of individuals who have committed violent acts, including at least three of the 9/11 hijackers, foreign fighters in Kashmir, rumored funders of al-Qaeda, and departing foreign fighters.²³ The AIVD remains wary of this network, tracking members in annual dossiers and reports while advising the mosques 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 *al-Fourkaan* because of their past glorification of violence committed in the name of Islam.²⁴

The Muslim Brotherhood is active in the Netherlands, though 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.”²⁵ However, because the Brotherhood has not been mentioned in any recent AIVD reporting suggests that their influence is not significantly concerning.²⁶

Other international Islamist groups may appeal to particular Muslim minority communities 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 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.²⁷ 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 list of all Gülen-affiliated organizations and individuals in the Netherlands. The Dutch government denounced this foreign interference in their domestic affairs; however, many parents withdrew their children from the “Gülen-list” schools.²⁸

Similarly, the Moroccan Arrahmane mosque in Amsterdam is the headquarters of the Dutch branch of Tablighi Jama’at. Although Tablighi Jama’at is avowedly apolitical, Dutch authorities believe that its ideology may further the “social isolation and radicalization” of vulnerable elements within the Moroccan immigrant community.²⁹ Internationally the movement is increasingly considered 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.³⁰

Finally, the radical pan-Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir maintains a small presence in the Netherlands. Although the number of its followers is believed to be in the low hundreds, the NCTV has noted 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.³¹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

As of 2018, roughly 5.1% of the Netherlands' total population of 17 million are Muslim.³² The two largest demographics within this population are Turks and Moroccans.³³ Other large Muslims communities come from Syria, Suriname, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, and Iran.³⁴ Several thousand native Dutch converts and children of second-generation Muslim immigrants comprise the last piece of the multifaceted Dutch Muslim community.³⁵

New studies by the Dutch government show that Dutch Muslims are increasingly religious – and increasingly isolated from the rest of Dutch society, challenging the integration-focused immigration policy of the Dutch government.³⁶ The average age of the Muslim population (25) is much lower than the national average (38).³⁷ This age gap, in combination with education level and language discrepancies, inhibits seamless societal integration and potentially increasing disaffection and alienation. Collectively this can lead to radicalization. The diversity of the Muslim community has also prevented any large-scale unified political movement from forming in support of its varied interests and concerns.³⁸

Turks make up the largest Muslim community in the Netherlands, and the infrastructure that exists to support them is quite sizable.³⁹ 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 Görüş movement, which is headquartered in Cologne, Germany.⁴⁰ This directorate maintains significant power over its diaspora community in the Netherlands, including the right to appoint *imams* for *Diyanet*-controlled mosques.⁴¹ However, all *imams* practicing in the Netherlands are required by the government to take a year-long “integration course.”⁴²

Traditionally, the government-controlled official nature of *Diyanet* has kept it distinct from Milli Görüş. For decades, in fact, the Turkish government was openly hostile to the group and suspicious of the multiple Islamist parties that followed it.

Moroccans constitute the second-largest Muslim community in the Netherlands but report stronger religious attitudes.⁴³ While only 45% of Turkish Muslim immigrants self-report as pious and strictly practicing, 84% of the Moroccan immigrant community identifies this way.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 that traveled to Syria were also Moroccan.⁴⁵ This has led to growing incidents of angry public rhetoric and anti-Moroccan discrimination; 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 several years ago calling for “fewer Moroccans” in the country.⁴⁶

The Syrian conflict has catalyzed changing attitudes among many Dutch citizens as the wave of refugees seeking asylum brings the conflict closer to home. In 2015, the Netherlands agreed to accept an additional 7,000 resettled asylum seekers who had originally arrived elsewhere in Europe over the course of two years.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.

In the wake of the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis, the famous Dutch tolerance appears to be replaced by rising xenophobia. In September 2016 (when the refugee crisis remained near its peak), the Pew Research Center reported that 61 percent of Dutch citizens believed that refugees would 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 the refugee crisis subsided and immigration returned to normal levels, this sentiment appears to have abated somewhat. Nevertheless, concerns about cultural integration have clearly provoked unease and fear among neighbors who blame multiculturalism for

increased violence and other social ills; 73% of Dutch respondents reported that immigrants need to adopt their host country's customs and traditions.⁵⁰ These attitudes may be further aggravated by other long-term trends in Dutch society, including increased secularization and the rise of populist parties using religion as a political tool while failing to differentiate Islam itself from political Islamism.⁵¹

The polarized climate poses a risk to Dutch society, in that 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 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.⁵³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Ever since the 2014 and 2015 attacks in Europe, the Dutch government has made it a strategic priority to lead continental anti-extremist efforts while simultaneously strengthening counterterrorism legislation and border security measures. The Netherlands maintains a liaison at U.S. Central Command and serves as a member of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, contributing military advisors, trainers and air power to the coalition's efforts.⁵⁴ Amsterdam also recognized the importance of travel intervention in keeping foreign fighters from leaving its territory. In 2017, the Dutch government adopted 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 joined a terrorist organization; 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.⁵⁵ Notably, these penalties can be imposed even without prior criminal convictions. The current policy also allows the NCTV to begin building cases against suspects *in absentia* before they have returned home from conflict areas⁵⁶ – a preemptive approach that enables more rapid apprehension upon a foreign fighter's return.

The government also seeks to isolate radicals, empower the voices of moderate Muslims, and strengthen the bonds between Muslim immigrants and the Dutch democratic political system and society.⁵⁷ To this end, the Netherlands helps lead the European Commission-sponsored Radicalisation Awareness Network and its Centre of Excellence; it has championed EU efforts to develop counter terrorism finance protocols. In August 2014, it began implementing 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.”⁵⁸ Some 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.

The program also emphasizes combating radical online behavior. Recognizing the power of social media as a recruiting and dissemination tool, the government implements new measures to identify and sanction online propaganda producers, 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.

As the primary counterradicalization stakeholder in the Dutch government, the NCTV is responsible for the program 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.”⁵⁹ The Dutch counter-radicalization approach focuses both on Islamic fundamentalists and right-wing nationalists, since racially-motivated attacks against Muslims (as occurred increasingly after film director Theo Van Gogh’s murder by a Moroccan-Dutch immigrant in 2004) can spike hate crimes and deepen feelings of alienation and anger.⁶⁰

This preventative outlook in the current European security environment demonstrates the Dutch government’s continued adherence to its so-called “broad approach” to countering radicalization.⁶¹ 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.”⁶² Program funds support 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, as proven by the aforementioned mandatory “integration course” for imams. 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, deride 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.⁶³ A 2017 justice ministry inspection 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, indicating that the policy has yet to take root in small areas and will likely require greater top-down direction.⁶⁴

At times, the narrative of the looming threat posed by potential radicals gains more ground than 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.⁶⁵ Fortuyn was known for his aggressive stance against militant Islam and a hardline belief that Dutch borders must be closed to Muslim immigration because Islamic values clashed irreconcilably with Dutch society.⁶⁶ 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), his political mantle was quickly assumed by Geert Wilders and the Freedom Party (PVV).⁶⁷ 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 1.5 to 2 million Dutch citizens).⁶⁸ Like Fortuyn, Wilders does not differentiate between Islam and Islamism. He considers Islam a threat to Dutch society and to the West; this position has drawn legal action. In December 2016, Wilders was convicted for inciting discrimination against the country’s Moroccan minority. The conviction did not hurt his party’s image; 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

The PVV’s political fortunes have risen and fallen throughout the last decade, as activists opposed to restrictive immigration policies have clashed repeatedly with the rise of populist sentiments. In the 2017 parliamentary elections, the PVV came in second place behind Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s Liberal party, ensuring it could play the role of spoiler.⁷⁰ It took the Liberal Party a record 208 days to form a government by patching together a coalition with three other parties whose main uniting theme was that they were “anti-Wilders.”⁷¹ This fractured leadership validated Wilders’ image as the only alternative to an elite establishment willing to turn a blind eye to the existential threat posed by Islam as portrayed by the PVV.⁷²

While the PVV’s muted gains in 2018 suggest that the Dutch populace as a whole is far from sold

on Wilders' ideology, it continues to polarize Parliament and the public debate by undermining the government's counter-radicalization approach.⁷³ In June 2018, for example, the Dutch Senate granted Wilders a victory when it voted to outlaw wearing any face-covering clothing (including the *burqa* and the *niqab*) in schools, hospitals, government buildings, and other public places.⁷⁴ Other items on the PVV agenda include proposals to ban "all forms of Muslim expression" including mosques, schools, burkas) to prohibit Dutch citizens with dual citizenship from voting or running for office (a move that Wilders has openly admitted is aimed at combating Turkish influence via the new minority *Denk* party in the Dutch parliament), and to halt all immigration from Islamic countries in pursuit of complete "de-Islamization" of the Netherlands.⁷⁵

Wilders launched a cartoon contest in June 2018 caricaturing the prophet Mohammed, prompting domestic outrage and a diplomatic rift with Pakistan (where thousands turned out to protest).⁷⁶ After Dutch police apprehended a suspect intent on killing Wilders, the government ordered the contest's cancellation.⁷⁷

Such bombastic stunts distract from the reality that the PVV is threatened on multiple fronts. On the one hand, many of the PVV's former faithful have grown disillusioned with the party and its policy that "everything that was wrong [in Dutch society] had to be linked to Islam in one way or another"; two of its former stars have reportedly abandoned the PVV and converted to Islam.⁷⁸ Yet a new party has arisen (the Forum of Democracy, or FvD); the FvD seeks to appropriate Wilders' rhetorical crusade to "save Dutch culture" from immigrants of all nationalities.⁷⁹ The PVV may have lost its monopoly, but the addition of the FvD to the Dutch political space has expanded and diversified the base that finds anti-immigrant rhetoric appealing. These political machinations aggravate the polarization between Dutch society and its Muslim communities, increasing opportunities for radicalization.

ENDNOTES

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