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Islam and the Netherlands: What is happening behind the dykes.

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## **‘Islam and the Netherlands, what is happening behind the dykes’**

In the European Union, besides the Netherlands, France is the only other country with a substantial Muslim population. In France, it is about 10% of the population, in the Netherlands about 5%. In both countries, but in France predominantly so, a major part of the Muslim population is of Moroccan origin or – in France only – with roots in Algeria and Tunisia. In France, formally the immigrants from the former colonies are considered to be ‘French’. In many ways they are, but in the last month rebellious Muslim youth made clear that their position in French society is extremely problematic: very high unemployment rates, bad housing conditions, geographical and social exclusion.

The situation in the Netherlands is quite different. Unemployment among the second generation is high, but not nearly as high as in France. Living conditions are generally much better and although there are tendencies of segregation (mainly of voluntary nature: people tend to seek residence near their compatriots), the majority lives in or near the centre of the major Dutch cities.

The Muslim population in the Netherlands divides itself up in two major groups – Turks and Moroccans – and a great number of smaller groups (migrants from Iran, Irak, Afghanistan, former Yugoslavia, Somalia, etc.). The latter are mainly refugees having sought access to the Netherlands in the early and middle nineties. The Turks and Moroccans started to come in small numbers as host labourers in the middle of the sixties. About ten years later they were followed by their spouses and children. In contrast to many of the refugees the immigrants from Turkey and Maroc came practically exclusively from the most remote and poor areas of their native country: the Rif-mountains in the north of Maroc and the most eastern regions of Turkey. Most of these migrants are nearly complete illiterate and only speak the language of their native region.

Although many of them are faithful Muslims and rather conservative in their social and religious views, fundamentalist ideas were not very popular with the first generation. Even today and also in the second generation especially, the Turks do not seem to be influenced by Muslim-fundamentalism. The position of the Moroccan group is somewhat more difficult to assess. In some Moroccan mosques (there are in total now about 500 mosques in the Netherlands) an aggressive type of fundamentalism seems to attract an audience of young people, born and educated in the Netherlands and very well versed in the Dutch language. The number of people ready to engage in terrorist activities is unknown. Interestingly, some of the core-members of the terrorist ‘Hofstad’ group, apprehended by the police after the attack on Theo van Gogh, were converts of mixed origin.

In the last five years there is a fierce debate in Dutch media and politics on the feasibility of a peaceful multicultural society. Ms. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somalian refugee who became member of parliament, is very outspoken in her warnings against the aggressive nature of Islam and urges the cabinet to demand from the Dutch Muslim society an unequivocal acceptance of the Dutch constitution and western norms and values. Her strong views and her collaboration with Theo van Gogh (he directed the sort movie ‘Submission’, she wrote the scenario) made her the target of murder threats by international fundamentalist Muslim groups. Nobody knows how serious the threats addressed to her really are, but for several years now she is surrounded by bodyguards and protected in a way that has no precedent in Dutch history.

The terrorist threat has changed many things in public life in the Netherlands. The houses of Parliament, the departments of the ministers, the private office of the Prime Minister are under constant surveillance and only providing entrance on identification and after tight security control.

Dutch immigration laws became more strict when prime minister Wim Kok was still in office, but the implementation was left to the cabinet-Balkenende and its minister for immigration, Mrs. Rita Verdonk. Her policy is to be characterized as a strict observance of the rules of the law. The number of asylum seekers and immigrants has dropped substantially in the last years (from over 60.000 ten years ago to less than 10.000) and 'newcomers' are obliged to follow integration and language courses. Many Muslims sense a sphere of growing hostility around them and this alienates them from Dutch society, quite contrary to the reaction the government would like to see. Even if the concept 'multicultural society' is now out of fashion, there is still very much the feeling that Dutch society has to find a way to prevent (further) social exclusion.