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Training imams in the Netherlands: the failure of a post-secular endeavour

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ABSTRACT

What are the reasons behind the failure of the Islamic theology and imam-training programmes at the Dutch universities? To address this question, we employed qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews ($N = 38$) conducted between July 2016 and January 2017. The sample consists of stakeholders such as academics teaching in the programmes, imams, Qur'an teachers, chairs of the largest Islamic organisations, and Dutch ministry and municipality officials. We analysed the establishment of the state-funded Islamic theology and imam-training programmes in the Netherlands in the light of the different theoretical accounts about the evolution of Dutch secularism after the de-pillarisation of the Dutch society. The findings suggest that the failure of the programmes stemmed from distrust in the intentions of the funding by the Dutch government, lack of confidence in the expertise of the non-Muslim academics teaching the programmes and refusal by the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), to cooperate with the universities for the set-up of the programmes. This study shows that future attempts for Islamic theology programmes in the Dutch universities will need to establish better connections with the grassroots of the Dutch Muslim communities.

KEYWORDS

Imam-training; Dutch Muslims; secularism; the Netherlands

Introduction

The great majority of imams in Europe originate from Muslim majority countries such as Turkey and Morocco where they receive their professional training. They are often criticised for lacking familiarity with the language and culture of the host society and are considered inadequate in connecting to the experiences of generations of Muslims born in Europe. Media contribute to the negative image of so-called 'import-imams' associating them with foreign-financing, indoctrination and radicalisation among the youth (Shadid 2006; Døving 2014).

Although since 1970s there have been various collaborative initiatives for Islamic seminaries in several European countries such as Britain, France, Austria and Germany, few graduates of these seem to choose to pursue careers as European-educated imams (Van Bruinessen 2011; see Johansen 2006 for detailed discussion of Austrian, German and Dutch initiatives). Many European countries among which Germany and Britain view 'import-imams' as a source of contention. Kamp (2008), for example, points out that education provided by foreign imams in the mosques in Germany is seen as problematic because 'its content and the methods employed in teaching have more in common with the conditions of the societies of their countries of origin, than with the social conditions prevalent in Germany'. In their study of British mosque education, Cherti and Bradley (2011, 6) report that 40% of their respondents say that they were taught by foreign imams who were not capable of providing adequate support to children 'in understanding their dual British-Muslim identity'.

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Differently than in their home countries where imams are primarily expected to lead the prayers in the mosque and to provide religious advice, some European imams perform a diverse range of additional tasks. The Netherlands is a case in point as policy-makers and congregations alike expect them to play 'a positive role in the integration of the Muslim communities in the Dutch society by being a role model to his community, organizing events that bring together Muslims and non-Muslims and by acting as a youth worker solving problems involving Muslim youngsters' (Oueslati 2014, 251–252). For instance, the report commissioned by the Dutch government about the need for imam-trainings (OCW 2003, 7) states clearly that 'it is of big importance that imams – contrary to what can be expected to those coming from abroad – are able to base their message on the values valid in the Netherlands. Therefore, the government attributes great importance to the establishment of one or more imam-trainings which fit well into the Dutch society'. Such arguments underpin the reasoning behind the Dutch initiatives for state-funded Islamic theology and imam-training programmes.

Three such programmes were initiated over the past 12 years, namely, at Vrije University Amsterdam (VU), Leiden University and Inholland University of Applied Sciences. However, due to a failure to attract new students and high drop-out rate, they were all either discontinued or re-defined as religious studies programmes. Based on interviews with key stakeholders, this article aims to explore why the programmes were discontinued. The analysis is guided by the following research question: what are the reasons behind the failure of the state-funded Islamic theology programmes and imam-trainings at the Dutch universities? To set the ground, first we provide an overview of the Dutch context in terms of separation of church and state, and post-secularism. Then, we look at the attempts to establish state-funded Islamic theology and imam-training programmes in the Dutch universities. Next, we present an analysis of the stakeholder opinions on the reasons behind the failure of these programmes and discuss the implications therefore in the 'Conclusion' section.

Separation of church and state and (de-)pillarisation of the Dutch society

The Dutch secularism is built upon a notion of a separation of church and state. It is defined by a minimal state interference in the way religious communities manage their own affairs. This notion is adopted by all bureaucratic units of the Dutch state and is part of the dominant public understanding of the relationship of the state to the religious groups. The principle of separation of church and state has been intrinsically related to the pillarised system of the society. Pillarisation characterised the Dutch society between late 19th century and 1960s. It meant that the different religious or ideological communities ('pillars'), i.e. Catholics, Protestants and neutrals, functioned within their own segregated societal segment, each having their own media, schools and political parties.

A number of scholars tried to trace the historical evolution of Dutch secularism and suggested different explanations for the reasons behind the changes the Dutch model has undergone in time (Harinck 2006; Knippenberg 2006; Lechner 1996). For example, Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr (2012, 352–353) argue that Dutch secularism evolved from a 'model of secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity' into 'secularity for the sake of individual liberties' or 'secularity for the sake of national integration and development'. While the first model was mainly dominant during the period of pillarisation of the Dutch society, the latter started gradually gaining prominence after the settlement of Muslim migrants and the increased visibility of Muslim religiosity in the public space, thus after the 1960s. The authors claim that Dutch secularism evolved towards a more assertive form especially after the 2000s when the state witnessed the rise of far-right parties and their discourse on violent Islamic extremism. Consequently, state support for cultural emancipation of religious groups started being more questioned than before and 'national unity' became one of the key elements in the public and parliamentary debates about state neutrality and the Dutch Muslims.

Likewise, Verkaik and Tamimi Arab (2016) differentiate between constitutional secularism and culturalist/nativist secularism. Constitutional secularism is based on the religious rights of citizens derived from the Dutch Constitution guaranteeing them the freedom to express, practice, associate around and establish institutions in accordance with their belief systems. Culturalist

or nativist secularism, the authors claim, is a newer phenomenon emerging in the post-World War II period and characterised by the rise of individualist values and decrease in religiosity among the Dutch. Verkaik and Tamimi Arab (2016) contend that both types of secularism are in tension with each other because while constitutional secularism aims at protecting the religious rights of minorities, culturalist secularism relies on a nationalist discourse for 'Dutch norms and values' and is constructed in opposition to 'return of religion' as expressed in Islamic migrants' religiosity.

Based on that literature, there seems to exist a consensus about two major processes changing the nature of Dutch secularism: (1) de-pillarisation of the Dutch society as a result of decrease of religiosity and increase in individualist values and (2) positioning Dutch Muslims and their claims-making within the existing model of separation of church and state. Some scholars such as Maussen (2012) claim that the relationship between the Dutch state and Muslim immigrants, on the one hand, and policy responses to Muslim claims-making, on the other, were not shaped by the tradition of pillarisation. He argues that analysis of the policy debates over the last 35 years reveals no interest among Dutch politicians for the creation of an Islamic pillar, and despite the institutionalisation of Islam in many areas of public life, an Islamic pillar never came into existence. There are, however, many indicators pointing to the opposite. To begin with, despite de-pillarisation taking place since 1960s, it is remarkable that more than 60% of all Dutch primary schools are still denominational and nearly 70% of Dutch pupils attend such schools (OCW 2014). And while Muslim migrants' settlement in the Netherlands corresponds with the initial phases of de-pillarisation and an Islamic pillar has never officially come into existence, the Muslim communities have benefitted to various extent of institutionalisation comparable to the other religious communities. This meant, among others, receiving state funding for Islamic primary and secondary schools (Driessen and Merry 2006), having (local) political parties based on Islamic values (Verkuyten 2017), and two state-funded (albeit already discontinued) Islamic broadcasters (Landman 1997). Perhaps, this is why Dekker and Ester (1996, 331) talk about 'subjective de-pillarisation' occurring at the level of personal perceptions and attitudes towards the old system, while the pre-existing institutional arrangements in the educational and political sphere stay in place.

The post-secular society

Is it possible then to argue that the 'subjectively' de-pillarised Dutch society is a post-secular one? That is, a liberal democratic society in which religion not only does not lose ground but successfully maintains and even increases its influence in the politics and public sphere due to a more pronounced role of religious organisations in opinion making, immigration from countries with 'traditional cultural backgrounds', and native populations' increased awareness of their own religiosity. The concept of post-secularism was first introduced by Habermas (2008) in his 'Notes on Post-secular Society' and has been largely debated among sociologists of religion (e.g. Gorski et al. 2012; Harrington 2007; Johansen 2013; McGhee 2013). Some of his critiques would argue that it is limited in scope (taking rich Western democracies as the norm) that it overestimates the extent of change from secular to post-secular order since Western societies were not completely secularised anyway (Bader 2012), and that its focus on religious fundamentalism essentialises religion as 'irrational' and 'dangerous' (Mozumder 2011, 59–60).

Despite its limitations, the concept provides a helpful analytical framework which recognises the failure of the secularisation thesis and attempts to provide revised theoretical arguments for identifying the factors which shape the present modus operandi of state–church relations in the West. Thus, for the purposes of this article, we would suggest that despite formal state definition of the Dutch governmental bodies as secular, the society itself is post-secular in the sense put forward by Habermas.

Islamic theology and imam-training programmes in the Netherlands

Who are the Dutch Muslims?

Dutch citizens from Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese background form the largest Muslim communities in the Netherlands accounting for about 6% of the population (Berger 2014). According to official estimates, there are 475 mosques belonging to different ethnic communities (Berger 2014). Many of those fall under umbrella organisations: 146 mosques are under the Islamic Association Netherlands or the Dutch branch of the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet), 46 mosques are affiliated with Islamic Centre Association Netherlands (a mystic Turkish community of followers of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan), 45 mosques with Milli Görüş (a Turkish organisation inspired by the Turkish politician Necmettin Erbakan and his ideology of political religious nationalism), 90 mosques fall under the Union for Moroccan Organisations in the Netherlands, and about 40 Surinamese and Pakistani mosques are affiliated with the World Islamic Mission. The rest belongs to various smaller communities such as the Iraqi, the Tunisians, the Bosnians and the Egyptians.

1980s and 1990s: testing the ground

The first recommendations for setting up Dutch imam-training programmes appeared as early as 1982, about a decade after the settlement of the first waves of Muslim guest-workers (Landman 1999). The establishment efforts continued in the 1990s with further investigation into the demand by the communities and the institutional readiness of the universities to train Islamic preachers. At a round-table discussion organised by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW, Dutch abbreviation) in 1994, the Muslim organisations expressed their desire to cooperate with the educational institutions for the development of two-level imam-training programmes starting from secondary and followed at tertiary level of education (Landman 1999). This was followed by a report commissioned by the Ministry about the possibilities of starting imam-training programmes within the Dutch universities. Consequently, the Ministry identified five key points for the successful setup of the programmes: ‘a) cooperating with other countries like Morocco and Turkey; b) regulating an *inburgeringscursus* (integration course) for imams as long as the prospective imam training program had not yet been realized; c) studying the further developments of the next generations within the ethnic groups and their influence on the form of mosque boards in the future; d) starting a scholarly dialogue with Islam; [...], and e) keeping in mind the recommendations of the Landman report especially those with relevance to secondary education’ (Ghaly 2008, 370–371). It is worth noting that the Ministry did not act on these suggestions until after 9/11.

2000s: attempts for fully fledged Islamic theology and imam-training programmes

The decades since 2000 witnessed a renewed interest by the Dutch government. In 2002, a special integration course was started for imams coming from non-Western countries, and in 2004, the Ministry issued a call for applications for existing universities for the set-up of national imam-training programmes (Johansen 2006). Three universities qualified for financial support: the first programme was initiated in 2005 at VU, followed by Leiden University, and Inholland in 2006.

The Islamic theology programme at VU received 1.5 million euro as a subsidy for a period of six years (Ghaly 2008). However, it did not have the official support of any of the Islamic communities in the Netherlands, and no agreements about the employment of graduates were made with mosques (Johansen 2006). In time, the programme was re-defined and is still offered as a bachelor programme of Religious Studies with three specialisation areas: Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. The career prospects for graduates are listed as spiritual care workers in prisons, hospitals and nursing homes.

The programme at Leiden University was set up as Islamic Theology, accredited by an international committee of Islamologists and recognised by many experts as unique in Europe. The programme received a subsidy of 2.3 million euro for a four-year period (Ghaly 2008). The set-up

envisaged a two-step training: (1) academic, implemented by the university in the form of a three-year bachelor and one-year master program and (2) confessional, implemented by the Islamic communities themselves. Yet, the cooperation agreements with the Muslim communities were never completed. In 2011, due to insufficient interest by prospective students, the programme was discontinued.

The imam-training at Inholland constitutes a distinct case as it was founded with the support of five Islamic umbrella organisations, all adhering to Sunni Islam and recognising the need for professional training of imams in the Netherlands. The programme was subsidised with an amount of 400,000 euro (Ghaly 2008). It aimed at training Islamic professionals who would endorse 'helpfulness, open-mindedness, initiative, awareness and respect of diversity and co-citizenship, reflection on one's traditions, values, and personality' (Meuleman 2012, 236–237). Leading figures from the religious organisations were consulted in curriculum development process, and some were employed as teaching personnel. Despite involving major Muslim organisations, the programme suffered from a high drop-out rate and failed to attract new students. It also received criticisms about its reflective and interpretative character as Muslim students 'tend to treat Islam as a tradition to be learned and transmitted to others, not to reflect upon or see in a new light' (Meuleman 2012, 238). Moreover, the reputation of the programme at Inholland might have been additionally damaged by a research report published by the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO 2011) claiming that almost a quarter of Inholland's graduates received their diplomas unfairly. Eventually, in 2013, the programme stopped accepting new students, and the academic year of 2016–2017 produced its last graduates.

Method and sample

We conducted 31 individual and 3 group interviews with 38 key stakeholders, including experts teaching in the Islamic theology and imam-training programmes, academics studying the Dutch-Muslim communities, imams, Qur'an teachers, chairs of the largest Turkish and Muslim religious organisations, advisors on integration from the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, and municipality officials from Amsterdam and Utrecht working in the field of diversity management and radicalisation. We used expert interviews as a sampling method (Dorussen, Lenz, and Blavoukos 2005). In other words, the participants were selected because of their professional positions, expertise about the topic or holding a key role within an Islamic organisation. Group interviews were conducted only when the participants did not have the time for an individual interview and expressed a preference for a group interview instead. On average, the interviews took approximately one hour and were held at the location which was most convenient for the participants, their working place or home. Depending on the participants' preference, the interviews were conducted in Turkish, English or Dutch. Wherever needed, the data was translated into English by the first author and all translations were checked for accuracy by the second author. To ensure confidentiality, all names were anonymised and background information was omitted. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of our sample. We asked all participants the following question: 'Why do you think that the Islamic theology and imam-training programmes in the Dutch universities were not successful?'. We coded the

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Age	Range: 25-63	Average: 43,6		
Gender	28 men	10 women		
Education level	28 University	3 HBO	2 Imam Hatip	5 High school
Nationality	10 NL	6 TR	20 NL&TR	2 NL&MOR
Ethnicity	8 NL	28 TR		2 MOR
Years in the Netherlands	Range: 2–62 years	Average: 29,7		
Occupation	11 Imams and Qur'an teachers	12 Chairs or board members	2 Journalists	4 Researchers
	5 Educators	4 Policy-makers and advisors		

NL: Dutch; TR: Turkish; MOR: Moroccan; HBO: University of Applied Sciences.

transcribed interviews in qualitative data-analysis software Atlas.ti and conducted thematic analysis for identifying the recurring reasons pertaining to the failure of the programmes (for a detailed discussion of thematic analysis, see Braun and Clarke 2006).

Stakeholder opinions on the failure of the programmes

Except for informants associated with Diyanet, there appeared to be a consensus about the need for Dutch Islamic theology and imam-training programmes. This is in line with the findings of Canatan (2001) who identifies a demand for Dutch imam-trainings especially among educated Dutch Muslims who are dissatisfied with foreign imams' lack of knowledge of the local context. The following quote by a young urban professional, member of the Gülen movement, illustrated that point by implying the existence of a hidden agenda of the Turkish state:

It would be 100% better if they were trained here. The long arm of Ankara which we constantly hear about, it is here mostly thanks to Diyanet. If you train the imams here, then you cut that arm. Imams definitely have to be trained here and into a (version of) Islam compatible with the West.

Another young professional active in integration projects for Dutch Muslim youth also underlined the need for local Islamic theology and imam-training programmes. Yet, he pointed out that the Muslim communities have to initiate them themselves, with a shared responsibility and ownership of the curriculum between the Netherlands and the countries of origin:

The challenge is that those imams coming from Turkey and Morocco have received certain religious formation. In other words, everyone trusts them. But they have deficiencies when it comes to knowledge of pedagogy and of the social context here. Therefore, my ideal is an imam-training which is founded on solid religious knowledge with a part of the curriculum (implemented) here, and another part in Turkey or Morocco [...] They need to cooperate with the most important institutes in Turkey, Morocco and Malaysia, for example.

The few Diyanet informants who did recognise the need for local trainings were quick to stress that they were 'in principle not against such programmes' but the attempts would only be successful if they are 'not imposed by the (Dutch) state' and do not follow a 'curriculum based on political reasons'.

When it comes to the reasons behind the failure of the attempted programmes, the analysis revealed three main factors: (1) lack of trust in the intentions of the Dutch government in funding the programmes; (2) lack of confidence in the expertise of the non-Muslim academics teaching the programmes; and (3) Diyanet's refusal to cooperate with the universities for the set-up of the programmes.

Lack of trust in the intentions of the Dutch government

Many of the respondents pointed out that the Dutch government decided to fund the programmes with the objective to exert greater control over the mosques. Educating imams under a curriculum which is funded and supervised by the OCW would allow the state to monitor the norms, values and messages the new graduates receive more efficiently. One of the lecturers teaching at the imam-training programme at Inholland (who is also active as an imam at a Milli Görüş mosque) maintained that

Everything is security. If it weren't about security, no state official would be interested in saying 'let us educate your imams' or 'let us fund their education'.

Likewise, the account of an academic who was involved in the initial meetings of establishing the Islamic theology programme at VU suggests that the Dutch Security Service was involved in monitoring the programme:

From the beginning the public debate on having to have an Islamic theology education here in the Netherlands is always informed by violence and the issue of radicalization. That was quite clear and by definition means the involvement of the security service. But also involvement of the Dutch government.

Lack of confidence in the expertise of the non-Muslim academics

For others, the core problem was the unsatisfactory level of expertise of the academics teaching in the programmes. According to the imams we spoke with, the programmes were ‘too superficial’, ‘too Dutch’ or ‘Orientalist’. A leading figure within Milli Görüş commented that

There were problems with these programmes. For example, some say that they were too simple, some say that they were too heavy. [...] But also there was a problem of trust. For example, they bring one professor, but the professor is Orientalist, in other words, he does not interpret Islam the way we do, or the way we would find appropriate. [...] When most of the mosques do not accept the graduates due to this lack of trust, the students are bound to have difficulty with finding employment.

Similarly, Diyanet imams who have received their theological education in Turkey claimed that it was impossible to offer Islamic theological education on the same level in the Dutch universities due to lack of secondary Islamic education in the Dutch system – or imam-hatip high schools with extensive training in Arabic to build upon. In addition, many respondents criticised the lack of cooperation with the countries of origin of major Muslim groups in the Netherlands and major Islamic Theology centres in the Muslim world. None of the three universities offered exchange programmes with established departments of Islamic theology in countries like Egypt, Morocco or Turkey. In this respect, one of the academics critically remarked as follows:

I think that if you want to have an Islamic theology department here, the students in that department should at least study abroad one year of those six years. To have some credibility as authority. Let's say for example nine months in Morocco and three months in Turkey. Or even in Arab country. But it is quite clear that the Dutch government doesn't want that.

For some imams and Qur'an teachers, the issue of the expertise was also a question of authority and identity: only Muslim scholars – being insiders of the religion – were recognised as having access to genuine Islamic knowledge and spiritual values. In this regard, a young second-generation imam, graduate of the International Islamic Theology programme of Ankara University and employed by the Dutch Diyanet, commented the following:

Because it is not only about knowledge transmission. It is about that spirit, the moral values and all those things. It is different when a Dutch person teaches you a course in history of Islam or a course in Qur'anic interpretation because he will do it as if he is teaching biology or mathematics. But it makes such a difference to take these lessons from a professor who has dedicated himself to these subjects and has internalised them, he will explain them much better and this knowledge will stay with you.

Diyanet's refusal to cooperate

This is a very significant factor as more than half of the mosques serving Dutch Muslims from Turkish origin (or almost one third of all Dutch mosques) are governed by Diyanet. The Diyanet imams in our sample reported that they are sent and paid by the Turkish government following an annual nationwide exam for Turkish theology graduates and an interview with a committee comprised of officials from the Turkish Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is also why the academics founding the programmes at VU and Inholland have recognised Diyanet as an important actor and have proposed cooperation in designing the curriculum of the programmes. Such cooperation would imply that the graduates of the Dutch programmes would be offered jobs as imams in the Dutch Diyanet mosques as well. In this regard, a key figure from the umbrella organisation for the Dutch mosques, Contact Organ for Muslims and the Government remarked that

Both VU and Inholland spent lots of efforts to involve Diyanet as partners, they really wanted to collaborate. But Diyanet does not accept that because if it does, then bringing its own imams from Turkey will become problematic.

When asked about the reasons for lack of cooperation, some informants associated with Diyanet claimed that they were never asked for cooperation to begin with. Others explained that Diyanet was 'expecting such state-funded initiatives after the 9/11 discourse' but they did not support them because they would remain superficial with no Islamic professional training at the secondary level.

Differently than other Muslim-majority countries, the training of imams in Turkey happens under the control and scrutiny of the state (Aşlamacı and Kaymakcan 2017). It has been already pointed out by some scholars of politics and religion in Turkey (Öktem 2012; Öztürk 2016; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018) that Diyanet acts as a faith-based state apparatus which has been further instrumentalised under consecutive Justice and Development Party governments in promoting the ideological agenda of the Turkish state among Muslim minorities and the Turkish diaspora abroad. A senior academic involved in establishing the Islamic theology programme at VU underlined that for Diyanet, being able to send and employ its own imams is a matter of control:

I spoke with the director of the international branch of Diyanet in Ankara couple of years ago and he was very much kind of 'you can do whatever you want in the Netherlands or anywhere in terms of training but in the end we decide whether or not we accept imams from that training'. I think that's the big issue. Diyanet simply says 'we want to keep control over this'.

Diyanet mosques' unwillingness to employ the graduates of the Dutch programmes on the one hand and the low salaries and 'insecure terms of employment' (Oueslati 2014, 251) offered by the rest of the mosques, on the other, contributed to a perception of poor career prospects for the graduates. Although it does not come to the fore very prominently in our findings, some studies suggest that personal economic reasons are an important determinant of the lack of success of the Dutch imam-trainings as young people educated in Europe expect higher salaries and thus 'only persons educated in the country of origin' are willing to work under these conditions and even they leave the positions of imams 'once they have gained immigrant status' and 'found the possibility for more profitable employment' (Van Bruinessen 2011, 7). As a consequence of all the abovementioned reasons, the programmes failed to attract new students and suffered a high drop-out rate, leading to the eventual dismantlement or in the case of VU, re-arrangement of the training in a more scholarly direction.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that there is a need for re-evaluation of the official 'separation of church and state' claimed to be espoused both by the Netherlands and by Turkey. Their institutional differences notwithstanding, both countries define themselves as secular states in which religious issues are expected to be contained in the private (individual or communal) life of the citizens and allegedly have no impact on governmental policy-making. Nevertheless, as exemplified earlier, the Netherlands dedicates a significant amount of funds for state-supervised training of Islamic preachers, and Turkey insists on not lending its cooperation for these trainings that would trump the way for sending its own religious officials. In that sense, the failure of the Dutch Islamic theology and imam-training programmes is 'post-secular' because both the Dutch and the Turkish state exhibit what Habermas would call 'post-secular consciousness'. This acknowledges the relevance of religion and of religious ideas in shaping not only public discourse, but also educational and foreign policy-making.

The Dutch state's funding of Islamic higher education seems to be in line with its policy for funding religious primary and secondary schools. The analysis of the interviews shows, however, that in this case it seems to be guided by an interest in controlling and monitoring the profile of the imams in the mosques rather than by provision of religious rights implied by constitutional secularism. In this sense, it is in conflict with its official ideology of separation of church and state defined by minimal state interference in the way religious communities manage their own affairs

and inconsistent with the proclaimed trend of de-pillarisation. Differently than the Islamic primary and secondary schools, the discussed attempts for Islamic higher education are not initiated by the Dutch Muslim communities. Moreover, the stakeholders' opinions indicate that the Dutch government's interest in funding the programmes does not stem from its interest in the production of Islamic knowledge in the West, nor from its interest in the creation of a space for critical reflection on the emerging forms of European Islam. Rather, it appears to be an interest in managing the Muslim communities and educating imams who would preach in accordance with the 'Dutch values and norms'. The expert opinions in our study also point out that any future attempts for Islamic theology programmes in the Dutch universities will need to establish better connections with the grassroots of the Muslim communities. Analytical reading of the reasons of failure reveals that some of the core recommendations in Landman's report from 1995 – such as cooperation with sending Muslim countries and establishing professional Islamic secondary education – were not taken into consideration neither before nor after the set-up of the university programmes. According to the stakeholders in our study, to gain more credibility and authority among the Dutch Muslims, the programmes need to make greater space for scholars from established theological departments in the Muslim majority countries and develop exchange programmes.

Furthermore, future imam-training initiatives within the established Dutch universities seem futile without successful cooperation with Diyanet. This, however, does not seem plausible in the current context in which the Dutch public debate is dominated by a diplomatic tension between the Netherlands and Turkey, and a political talk about withdrawing the work and residence permits of Diyanet imams. As a solution to this threat, Diyanet is recruiting Dutch-Turkish students with dual nationality for its International Islamic Theology programme based in Turkey, offering full scholarships, boarding and employment upon graduation.

Additional challenges to the success of future initiatives also might stem from the lack of cooperation and mistrust within the Dutch Muslim community itself which is highly segregated along ethnic lines and dominated by Sunni Islam. A research about the community links and the leverage of private initiatives for Islamic higher education such as the Islamic University of Rotterdam, the Islamic University of Europe in Rotterdam and the private imam-training of Milli Görüş in Germany, might provide further insight into the possibilities of training imams within the Dutch context.

Last but not least, in the current political context in Europe in which the role of 'import-imams' is hotly debated and intertwined in issues of immigrant integration and civic allegiances, our findings have implications for imam-training programmes in other countries as well. As pointed out earlier by Van Bruinessen (2011), graduates of imam-training programmes elsewhere in Western Europe seem to be unwilling to serve as imams in European mosques. In this regard, there is a need for a comparative research tapping into the individual and structural reasons making the profession of imam unattractive for the future generations of European Muslim youth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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