

# Muslims in the Netherlands: Tensions and Violent Conflict

MICROCON Policy Working Paper 6  
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May 2009

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SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

Correct citation: Veldhuis, T. and Bakker, E. 2009. *Muslims in the Netherlands: Tensions and Violent Conflict*. MICROCON Policy Working Paper 6, Brighton: MICROCON.

First published in 2009

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ISBN-13 978 185864 591 3

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## **Muslims in the Netherlands: Tensions and Violent Conflict**

**Tinka Veldhuis<sup>1</sup> and Edwin Bakker<sup>2</sup>**

### **MICROCON Policy Working Paper 6**

**Abstract:** The Dutch fear of violence involving Muslims typifies the implicit association that people easily seem to make between Muslims and violence. Almost irrespective of the actual level of violent incidents, Muslims seem to project an image of responding violently to every political incident. How did this image come into being? In the Netherlands, what types of incidents and developments have occurred that led to potentially violent tensions and conflicts in which Muslims were involved? This paper seeks to answer this question. First, it elaborates on radicalisation and on tensions and violent conflicts, both within and between social groups, and on the underlying mechanisms that are responsible for causing inter-group conflicts. Thereafter, we give an overview of radicalisation and tensions and violent conflicts involving (elements of) Muslim communities in the Netherlands. In the concluding part, we elaborate on global trends regarding the peaceful or not-so-peaceful co-existence of different social groups and focus on the current situation in the Netherlands.

**Keywords:** Radicalisation; Islam; The Netherlands; youth; terrorism; integration

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## **Introduction**

The release of the anti-Islam movie “Fitna” by the Dutch Member of Parliament Geert Wilders, early 2008, aroused anxious fears of angry responses by Muslims communities. As happened in the Danish cartoon crisis, people expected the movie to trigger violent demonstrations, boycotts, the burning of flags and other aggressive responses by Muslim communities, both in the Netherlands and around the world. Months prior to the actual release of the movie, the Dutch prime minister already spoke of a crisis, predicting violent confrontations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and devastating consequences for Muslim integration in Dutch society.

Contrary to the wide anticipation that Muslims would respond violently to the movie, there were few incidents. In the Netherlands, there were no noticeable incidents at all. Eloquent young Muslims stepped forward as representatives for their communities and of Islam, explicitly distancing themselves from radical or violent action by Muslims in answer to the film. Likewise, orthodox Muslims made strong pleas to react in a non-violent and dignified way to “Fitna”. Outside the Netherlands, there were only a few incidents, like the attack on a Dutch consulate in Indonesia by a group of students and the expected burning of the Dutch flag in countries like Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, the Dutch fear of violence involving Muslims typifies the implicit association that people easily seem to make between Muslims and violence. Almost irrespective of the actual level of violent incidents, Muslims seem to project an image of responding violently to every political incident. How did this image come into being? In the Netherlands, what types of incidents and developments have occurred that led to potentially violent tensions and conflicts in which Muslims were involved?

This paper seeks to answer this question. For that purpose, it first elaborates on radicalisation and on tensions and violent conflicts, both within and between social groups, and on the underlying mechanisms that are responsible for causing inter-group conflicts. Thereafter, we give an overview of radicalisation and tensions and violent conflicts involving (elements of) Muslim communities in the Netherlands. We focus on three different categories of events: Muslims ‘attacking’ non-Muslims, non-Muslims ‘attacking’ Muslims and confrontations between or within Muslim communities. In the

concluding part, we elaborate on global trends regarding the peaceful or not-so-peaceful co-existence of different social groups and focus on the current situation in the Netherlands.

## **1. Tensions, conflicts and radicalisation**

Essentially, we are interested in types of incidents and developments that have or may have posed a threat to a) the democratic order, b) society at large or c) that have or may have otherwise undermined integration of minorities or relations between and within social groups in the Netherlands. That is, the focus lies on violent incidents, or incidents that may potentially have led to violent outcomes.

For example, in October 2007, Bilal Bajaka, a young Dutch Muslim from Moroccan descent, entered a police station in Amsterdam, pulled a knife and stabbed two police officers. In self-defence, one of the officers shot the man who died on the spot. Immediately, the incident prompted questions about the perpetrator's motivations. Was Bajaka a radical Islamist, inspired by fundamentalist ideologies and beliefs that instructed him to attack any representation of the Dutch state? Was this an act of terrorism or was the perpetrator simply a criminal whose acts were not religiously or politically charged? It was rapidly publicised that Bajaka was probably not radicalised; apparently, he was a suicidal schizophrenic who had just left a psychiatric clinic where he had been treated for mental problems. Nevertheless, especially after it turned out that in 2005, Bajaka had had loose contacts with some of the members of the Hofstadgroep – the radical network that included the murderer of filmmaker Theo van Gogh – the media started speculating about whether Bajaka was a radical Islamist and whether the Netherlands was the target of a terrorist attack. Although the Bajaka case was unrelated to radicalisation or terrorism, the incident triggered riots among young Muslims in immigrant neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and fuelled tensions between Muslim and the non-Muslim communities in the Netherlands.

The foregoing example illustrates the implicit association that is often made between incidents involving Muslims and radicalisation, although this link is often not justified. Particularly after the assassination of Theo van Gogh, who was murdered by a radical Islamist named Mohammed Bouyeri, radicalisation of Muslim youth received

extensive attention by Dutch media, policy-makers, politicians and academics. Radicalisation is only one manifestation of intergroup conflicts, however, and in contrast to what often seems to be popular belief, most Muslim-involving tensions and conflicts are not associated with radicalisation. In fact, radicalisation of Muslims is a very rare phenomenon. In comparison with other European countries, the Netherlands is home to a relatively large Muslim community: according to the latest estimations, over 857,000 Muslims live in the Netherlands, comprising approximately 5% of the total population (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2007). According to the Dutch Minister of Integration, between 20,000 and 30,000 of them are potentially attracted to Salafi ideologies, and yet another 2,500 might be susceptible to violent radicalisation (Kloor 2007). The latter figure represents only a mere 0.3 percent of the total Muslim population. Although radicalisation of Muslims can have profound societal consequences, it is quite rare.

### ***1.1 Defining radicalisation***

What is radicalisation exactly? Despite the increased scientific attention to radicalisation and its causes and consequences, scholars have not yet developed a generally accepted definition. Nevertheless, faced with pressure to tackle radicalisation, policy-makers have developed a few definitions. In particular, the European Commission came up with a clear and frequently applied definition of violent radicalisation: “The phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views, and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism” (European Commission 2006). This definition accounts for a few distinct features of radicalisation that illustrate the differences with other types of tensions and conflicts.

Primarily, although it can occur very rapidly, radicalisation is a gradual process that has no strictly specified beginning or end. It is a two-fold process including a shift in thinking towards fundamentalism and a heightened readiness to act on behalf of a cause. Secondly, its gradual nature indicates that in most cases, the direct causes or triggers of radicalisation are unclear and can even be unknown to the radicalising person. Rather, radicalisation is the product of a combination of causal factors that interact and that is unique for every individual (Veldhuis and Bakke 2007). People are drawn to radical movements or ideologies for different reasons, of which some are more conscious than

others. Whereas some are primarily inspired by ideological or political motivations, others might simply be attracted by action and adventure or seek group membership to obtain a positive identity. Even more so, radicalisation can occur beyond the consciousness of the relevant person, who might not be aware that he or she is in a process of radicalisation.

Again, the Bajaka case, which was unrelated to radicalisation but triggered violent behaviour by young Muslims in Amsterdam, illustrates how radicalisation is only one factor in the emergence of tensions and conflicts involving Muslims. Therefore, the present study aims to widen the scope and focuses on a broad spectrum of incidents and developments that, over the last three decades, have led to tensions and conflicts, including cases of radicalisation, in which elements of the Muslim community have been involved. In doing so, however, one essential question deserves further exploration. How do tensions and conflicts between social groups emerge and under what circumstances are they likely to be sustained and result in violent outcomes?

## ***1.2 Inter-group tensions and violent conflicts***

The first academic notions on the origins of inter-group tensions and conflicts date back several decades. Initially, the main premise was that realistic competition between groups leads to favouritism of the own group (in-group) and hostility towards other groups (out-groups). See for example Sherif and Sherif 1953 and Sherif 1966). Since that time, however, our understanding of the wellspring of inter-group conflicts has grown considerably sophisticated. Decades of empirical investigations of the roots of inter-group conflict have reached the conclusion that, irrespective of the presence of competition or conflicting group interests, the mere act of categorising individuals into groups can generate tensions and conflicts between groups (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to social identity approaches and self-categorisation theories (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002; Turner 1982; Turner 1984), people define themselves not so much in terms of self, but rather in terms of group membership. People are driven by a powerful need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995), and simply categorising people based on random, meaningless associations like colour preference or even by the flip of a coin, can trigger the sense of belongingness in

people. To feel good about themselves, people thus need to feel good about the group and seek collective self-esteem (Crocker and Luhtanen 1990). In doing so, people make biased judgments. For example, they tend to attribute superiority to the in-group over out-groups and derogate other groups and their characteristics as inferior. In addition, they tend to believe that whereas the in-group is heterogeneous, members of the out-group are all similar to one another (Linville and Jones 1980; Linville, Fischer and Salovey 1989) and very different from members of the in-group (Pettigrew 1997). Hence, the mere perception that one belongs to a social group can be sufficient to activate stereotypes and discrimination of out-groups and can eventually result in violence between groups.

Having said this, two important implications become clear if we look at how conflicts involving Muslims can emerge. First, an identity crisis can have profound consequences for people's well-being and behaviour. An identity crisis can arise under various circumstances, for example, when the group we wish to affiliate with rejects us or when we are unsure which group we identify with. Scholars often suggest that many young, second-generation Muslims in the West face an identity crisis (Choudhury 2007 and Malik 2007). On the one hand, they face a generational conflict with their parents. On the other, they do not feel fully accepted by Dutch society. Buijs and his colleagues (Buijs, Demant and Hamdy 2006), for example, suggest that Moroccan youngsters in the Netherlands feel alienated from both their parents and Dutch society and have a hybrid-identity that is not recognised and accepted by their direct environment. Consequently, they find a satisfactory identity in the *Ummah* that connects them with other Muslims and for which nationality, be it Moroccan or Dutch, becomes irrelevant.

Second, once people have categorised themselves into a social group and this group has become an important part of their social identity, issues that concern the group also concern the individual. This implies that members of a group will perceive and treat a threat to the group as a personal threat (Smith 1993). Given that Muslims perceived the anti-Islam film "Fitna" as an illegitimate assault on Islam, the release of the movie definitely had the potential to result in violent outcomes. Indeed, prior to the release of "Fitna" the public, the media and even the government suspiciously eyed the Muslim community in anxious anticipation of violent responses. Fortunately, violent manifestations remained absent but the release illustrates how incidents that prompt a



sense of being threatened among Muslims can easily erupt in violent outbursts or otherwise negatively affect inter-group relations with Muslim communities.

## **2. Radicalisation and organised groups**

In the Netherlands of today, Muslim communities are – rightly or wrongly – associated with tensions, violence and radicalisation. It should be stressed that this is a rather new perception. In the past Muslims were at first associated with work many Dutch no longer wanted to do. During the 1960s and 1970s, the larger Dutch companies recruited a considerable number of so-called ‘guest workers’ from Turkey and Morocco. Additionally, refugees and immigrants from former colonies like the Antilles, Suriname and Indonesia were arriving in substantial numbers and creating large communities of immigrants in the Netherlands. Initially, guest workers were encouraged to return home as soon as the Dutch labour market no longer required their services, but most did not. On the contrary, a process of family reunification took place, bringing thousands of new immigrants, mainly women and children. Since the early 1980s, sizable communities emerged from Morocco, Turkey, and Suriname, mainly concentrated in the larger cities and industrial areas. During this period, the Netherlands experienced its first encounters with radical Islam and tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. Naturally, the societal context as it is today is a product of developments and incidents that occurred over decades. In other words, in order to understand the contemporary relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in the Netherlands, it is essential to take into account the historical context in which these relationships developed. For that reason, we include incidents of tensions and conflicts involving Muslims in the Netherlands that occurred within a time span of approximately three decades; from the 1980s until today. First, however, we discuss the rise and increase of radicalisation in Muslim communities.

### ***2.1 Radicalisation in practice***

Radicalisation among Muslims in the Netherlands is not a post-9/11 phenomenon. However, since the attacks on the United States in 2001, this process and in particular radical Islamism has been generally regarded as a threat to the state, Dutch society and Muslim immigrant communities in general. This feeling was intensified by a series of

terrorist incidents and numerous scandals in the Netherlands that revealed extremist, discriminatory and illegal practices by a number of radical Islamist groups and institutions.

The first signs of radicalisation date back to the 1980s, when individuals and groups started to organise themselves around issues such as the start of the first Palestinian intifada in 1987, and the row over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988. The demonstrations related to these events alarmed the Dutch Minister of the Interior, who was aware that these incidents could lead to increasing tensions in the Netherlands with regard to Islamism.

Following the Rushdie affair, fears regarding the influence of radical Islamism within Muslim communities increased. This concern led to publication of the first public reports on radical Islamist groups' activities, produced by the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (then known simply as the Security Service). In 1991, the Service revealed the existence of small groups of militant fundamentalists and expressed concern regarding their consequences for the integration of Muslims into mainstream society; the Service indicated the possibility that these militants might offer their services to foreign powers or that these countries were already directing them.

Partly based on the idea that the existence of such groups could hamper the integration process, the Erasmus University of Rotterdam was asked to investigate this potential threat. Their classified study, whose main conclusions were made public in 1994, found that radical Islamists had indeed attempted to impede this process but had not been very successful in their endeavour. Furthermore, it concluded that very few Muslims wanted to challenge existing social structures in the Netherlands.

In its 1995 annual report, the Service reaffirmed the idea that the threat of radical Islamism was rather limited. It stated that there was no real threat from Islamic society in the Netherlands. However, it noted serious prejudices toward Islam that had a negative impact on the integration of Muslims into mainstream society. Various terrorist attacks by Islamists – including those in France (attacks by the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armé), Israel (suicide attacks on buses in Jerusalem) and the United States (the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center) – were among the factors leading to such negative stereotypes.

After 1995, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services abandoned the idea that the threat posed by radical Islamism was insignificant. From 1996 onwards, all public documents on this issue repeated warnings about the potential danger. Moreover, the 1996 annual report spoke for the first time of information on possible attacks in the Netherlands, by Hizballah, which had been investigated by the Service.

In response to the increase in Islamist terrorist activities worldwide as well as growing concern over domestic developments, in 1998 the Service published a report on political Islam in the Netherlands. It described the various political organisations based on Islam. Most of them, in one way or another, rejected Western society and the integration of Muslims into that society. Yet the report revealed that only small groups of Muslims had radical opinions and were prepared to pursue their ideal of an Islamic state or world order through violent means. With regard to mosques, the report depicted them as political arenas in which many different political actors operated. The main political issues were integration and education. Some of the actors were supported or influenced by foreign powers, with Iran, Libya and Saudi Arabia being mentioned as examples. In addition, the governments of some of the mother countries of Muslim migrants were known to be interfering in the political-religious lives of their (former) nationals in the Netherlands – something particularly evident in the cases of Morocco and Turkey.

The interference of external forces was also apparent in the field of education. For instance, the Libyan al-Da'wa movement (which is linked to the Islamic Call Society), was involved in the establishment of an Islamic university in Rotterdam. The same holds for the Turkish government's Directorate for Religious Affairs (Diyanet Iserli Baskanligi).

Concerning political-religious organisations, the report showed that most were established on a national basis. Their focus of interest mainly pertained to their countries of origin and not the fate of the Muslims in the West. However, they did try to gain support from this Diaspora by way of taking a strong anti-Western, anti-integration and isolationist position. Although anti-Western feelings and resistance to integration were relatively widespread, the Service concluded that political Islam played a minor role within Muslim communities. Moreover, it did not anticipate that the more radical variants of political Islamism in the Netherlands would gain in power and size. However, it did

warn that ongoing marginalisation of Muslim immigrants would possibly pose a long-term threat with regard to the growth of radical groups. Ideological polarisation between Muslims and their surrounding society was considered a likely consequence, which could possibly lead to a negative impact on the integration process, as well as undermine the peaceful and democratic coexistence of different cultures in the Netherlands.

By the end of the 1990s, the threat of radical Islamism in the Netherlands was still more or less a distant one. Threat perceptions were dominated by events taking place both outside the Netherlands and even beyond Europe. Moreover, on its territory, the main players were 'foreign' in the sense that the groups mainly consisted of foreign nationals who predominantly focused on their mother countries without receiving active support within the local Muslim communities. Nonetheless, the diversity of these groups continued to grow.

One of the leading causes of this growth was the increase in both legal and illegal immigrants with an Islamist background, including asylum seekers from Algeria, Bosnia, Chechnya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria. In the Netherlands, these individuals established political-religious organisations that were strongly oriented towards their mother countries. Examples include fundraising organisations for the Palestinians, Bosnia, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Algeria; some of these groups emphasised both ties to their mother countries and a strong rejection of the Western society in which they lived.

After the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the idea that Muslims posed a threat to Dutch society – even to the extent of considering them a Trojan horse or a fifth column – was gaining ground. This perception was bolstered by reports about the deaths at the hands of Indian security forces in Kashmir of two Dutch citizens of Moroccan descent who were believed to be jihadists. The boys who died in December 2001 shortly after their arrival in the troubled Indian territory were associated with one of the most radical mosques in the Netherlands, the Al-Fourqaan mosque in the city of Eindhoven.

These incidents also worried many politicians and policy-makers, leading them to request information about the extent and nature of Islamist terrorism in the Netherlands from the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Services. In a report published in March 2004, the Service estimated the numerical strength of radical Islamists to be

between 100 and 200 activists. According to the General Intelligence and Security Services, this group included so-called ‘veterans’ from Afghanistan and Chechnya, who played an important role in the conversion of young Muslims into potential jihadists. Moreover, the Service contended that there were several dozen young Muslims preparing for jihad. This jihad includes both conflict areas in the Muslim world and potential targets in Europe.

Furthermore, the role of these ‘veterans’ is not the decisive factor in the development of new recruits. Indeed, internal dynamics within groups of radical young Islamists play an important developmental role as well. This was observed through intensive Internet discussions among young Muslims on the developing patterns of strife in arenas of conflict such as Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq, which resulted in the development of increasingly radical opinions. Additionally, anti-Muslim feelings – brought on by incidents in the Netherlands as well as the Madrid bombings and other Islamist terrorist attacks abroad – also contributed to this radicalisation. Consequently, a number of these Muslim youths developed an exceedingly hostile attitude towards the Dutch state and society to the extent that these youngsters, predominantly of Moroccan descent, developed views so extreme as to embrace the use of violence. In November 2004, one of them, Mohammed Bouyeri, killed Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. This young Moroccan, born and raised in Amsterdam, was a member of the Hofstadgroep, a loose-knit radical Islamist group of mostly young Dutch Muslims.

## ***2.2 Radical groups***

The Hofstadgroep is probably the most extreme and infamous radical Muslim organisation in the Netherlands. There are, however, quite a number of other organisations that can be regarded as radical Muslim organisations. These include political groups, religious groups and all kinds of mixes between these two categories. Below is a list of the most important formal organisations and informal groups – in alphabetical order. It should be stressed that a number of these organisations do not consider themselves as radical. Nonetheless, they are generally considered as such by the authorities or scholars.

### *Al-Jama'a al-Islamia (AJAI)*

Al-Jama'a al-Islamia, or the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, is an Islamist group active since the late 1970s, with origins in the Muslim Brotherhood. The organisation's primary goal is to overthrow the Egyptian government and replace it with an Islamic state. The organisation is responsible for several terrorist attacks against high-level Egyptian government personnel and official US and Egyptian facilities. A few key members of AJAI live in the Netherlands, among them Usama Rushdie Ali Kalifa (who lived there until 2003).

### *Arab European League (AEL)*

The Arab European League is a pan-Arabist political and social movement that is active in Belgium and the Netherlands. The AEL was founded and is led by Dyab Abou Jahjah, a Lebanese-born Shiá Muslim who emigrated from Lebanon in 1991 to study political science in Belgium. The organisation strives to develop an Arab Muslim communalist movement in Europe. Particularly in Belgium, mainstream political parties sharply attacked the AEL for anti-integrative ideas, alleged anti-Semitism and for disturbing the social peace. In 2002, its leader was arrested and detained for several days after he allegedly organised riots and called for violence (see chapter on Belgium). In the Netherlands, the AEL was never associated with violence. Nonetheless, the organisation was under observation of the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD).

### *Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA)*

The Armed Islamic Group is a militant Islamist organisation with the declared aim of overthrowing the Algerian government and replacing it with an Islamic state. The GIA adopted violent tactics in 1992, after the Algerian military government voided the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the first round of legislative elections held in December 1991. It conducted a violent campaign of civilian massacres in Algeria. The GIA has also established a presence in Europe. In France, it was responsible for several terrorist attacks, and some of its members who were wanted by French authorities reportedly are hiding in the Netherlands.

### *Hamas/al-Aqsa Foundation*

Hamas, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, is a Palestinian Sunni Islamist organisation. At the beginning of the first intifada in 1987, Hamas was established by Shaikh Ahmad Yassin of the Gaza wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. The European Union lists it as a terrorist organisation. About a dozen individuals of Palestinian descent are actively involved in Hamas in the Netherlands, receiving financial support from a few hundred sympathisers. One of the institutions that channelled these funds was the al-Aqsa Foundation, which had a local branch in the Netherlands until the EU put it on the list of terrorist organisations and it was banned as an illegal organisation.

### *Hizb al-Tahrir*

Established in 1953 by Shaikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, Hizb al-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) is an Islamist political party whose goal is to re-establish the caliphate. The party has been banned in many Arab countries, Central Asia and a few Western countries (such as Germany). Its activities in Europe are concentrated in the United Kingdom, though the organisation also has a branch in the Netherlands. Most of its supporters are of Turkish or Moroccan background. They are organised in small groups numbering a few dozen people each. Their activities include the organisation of (protest) meetings against alleged attacks on Islam, such as the Danish cartoons, and the activities of the Dutch Member of Parliament Geert Wilders. These events have always been non-violent.

### *Hofstadgroep*

The Hofstadgroep is an Islamist organisation of mostly young Dutch Muslims of mainly Moroccan descent. The name 'Hofstad' was originally the codename the Netherlands secret service used for the network and leaked to the media. The name refers to the nickname of the city of The Hague, where some of the members used to live. In total, a few dozen of people were part of this loose-knit network of radicals. In the end, only a dozen of them were tried on membership of a terrorist organisation. Other charges included obstructing the work of Members of Parliament, including Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the illegal possession of firearms. Some members were acquitted for lack of evidence, while others were found guilty and sentenced ranging from one to fifteen years

imprisonment. Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of Van Gogh, was also sentenced for membership of the group. In January 2008, however, the Dutch Court of Appeals overturned a number of the convictions in the Hofstadgroep case. Although the Court of Appeals concluded that the alleged network members embraced and incited radical attitudes and ideologies, it stated that it could not be proven that the Hofstadgroep was a terrorist organisation and that these acts would inevitably result in terrorist engagement (Jensma 2008).

According to the Ministry of Interior, there exists a number of other loose-knit informal groups similar to the Hofstadgroep. Not very much is known about these radical groupings. The exception is the group around Samir Azzouz, also described as the ‘Piranha Group’, which is further described below.

#### *İslami Büyükdoğu Akıncılar Cephesi (IBDA-C)*

The Great Eastern Islamic Raiders Front follows the ‘Great East’ ideology of Necip Fazil Kisaktürek, a well-known Turkish author and Islamist ideologue. This organisation’s goal is the creation of a Sunni Islamist federal state in the Middle East and the re-establishment of the caliphate. The Front is responsible for a series of terrorist attacks in Turkey, including the dual synagogue bombings in Istanbul in November 2003 as well as the subsequent attack on the HSBC Bank and the British consulate. While support for this movement exists in the Netherlands, it has been limited in scope.

#### *Milli Görüş*

Milli Görüş, or ‘National Vision’, is a Turkish orthodox-Islamic movement that has clear political aspirations. Its aim is to Islamise the Turkish state and society through democratic ways. Milli Görüş has approximately 40,000 members in the Netherlands. The movement is part of the European Milli Görüş organisation whose headquarters are located in Cologne, Germany. The movement is widely considered to be of a politico-religious nature. The Dutch branch is considered more moderate than the German and Turkish branch.



### *Piranha Group/Samir Azzouz*

In October 2005, the police arrested a young Dutch national of Moroccan descent, Samir Azzouz, on suspicion of attempting to procure firearms and planning terrorist attacks in the Netherlands, a case that was codenamed 'Piranha Group' (District Court of Rotterdam 2006). Azzouz had been apprehended twice before on suspicion of terrorist activities, but had not been convicted. This time he and two others ended up in jail. In December 2006, Azzouz received a sentence of eight years for membership of an organisation with terrorist intentions, for preparing an attack and recruiting followers. He was not sentenced for membership of the Hofstadgroep, although he had close contacts with some of its members, including Mohammed Bouyeri (Benschop 2005). Azzouz is also known for his failed attempt to join the jihad in Chechnya. At 17 years of age, he and a friend were arrested at the border between Russia and Ukraine and sent back to the Netherlands.

### *Teblig movement (Islami Cemiyet ve Cemaatlar Birliđi)*

The Teblig movement, also known as Kaplanci's, is a radical splinter group of the Milli Görüs movement. Its goal is the establishment of an Islamist Turkish state, using force if necessary. Following the death of its spiritual leader Cemaleddin Kaplan in 1995, the organisation broke up into different factions. In the Netherlands, and today there are about 200 Muslims active within two separate Kaplan factions.

### **3. Types of tensions and violent conflicts**

As mentioned earlier, we look at three types of tensions and violent conflicts involving Muslims: incidents in which Muslims attack non-Muslims and vice versa, as well as incidents within and between Muslim communities. We look at politically inspired events, as well as political-religious and apolitical-religious or pseudo-religious violence. It should be stressed that it is sometimes rather difficult to make distinctions along these two lines. As in most conflicts, when two or more groups clash it is never easy to distinguish the perpetrators from the victims. The same holds for the nature of incidents. When is something politically inspired or more of a political-religious nature? Is a violent

demonstration of Muslims against the occupation of Palestine purely political, and what if some of the demonstrators wear burqas and djelabas?

Regarding the Netherlands, most of the violent attacks of Muslims against non-Muslims are associated with violent Islamists, who are considered political-religious. Most of the violent attacks by non-Muslims on Muslims are of a right-wing political nature, although the low level of political awareness of some of these groups and individuals raises questions. The tensions and violent conflicts between Muslim communities are both of a political and a-political nature. The same holds for confrontations within the same community.

We have singled out the incidents that attracted the most attention and that had most impact on communities and Dutch society as a whole. In the following sections, we first look at non-violent tensions, followed by violent incidents. Relatively much attention is paid to the only deadly incident, the murder of Theo van Gogh.

### ***3.1 Muslims versus non-Muslims***

#### *The al-Moumni affair*

In May 2001, a Moroccan imam, Khalid al-Moumni of the al-Nasr Mosque in Rotterdam, was interviewed on television. The interview took place against a backdrop of growing discrimination against homosexuals by Moroccan youth. When questioned about homosexuality, al-Moumni described it as a disease that was pandemic the world over and that posed a threat to Muslim youth. The interview led to a public outcry, causing leading members of parliament, NGOs and ministers to hold weighty discussions. Following this incident, a news agency began investigating al-Moumni's past. The agency revealed that the controversial imam was forced to leave Morocco because of his fundamentalist views and sermons in which he described Christians as pigs. The interview and article about al-Moumni led to debates in Parliament that called for closing Islamist mosques and possibly expelling radical imams. Even key members of liberal Muslim groups supported the idea of the closure of certain mosques. Resulting from this and other comparable incidents, the Dutch government received a lot of pressure from Parliament, the media and the public to take a tougher stance on Islamism than it did

before. After the al-Moumni incident, more would follow and a few radical Imams were indeed extradited from the Netherlands.

#### *Cheering young Moroccans on 9/11*

In the city of Ede, a group of young Muslims of mainly Moroccan descent allegedly was loudly celebrating the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001. Journalists were shooting pictures of some young man who had quickly printed a picture of Osama bin Laden. It remains unclear to what extent members of the media incited this small group of teenagers to produce this picture. Nonetheless, the incident provoked a lot of criticism and could be considered one of the starting point for journalists to hunt 'scoops' like this by finding out all kinds of worrisome developments within Muslims communities. At one official state-sponsored Islamic school, for instance, journalists found Hamas propaganda and posters glorifying attacks against the West.

#### *Foiled attack on the US embassy in Paris*

In July 2001, a Frenchman of Algerian descent, Djamel Beghal, was arrested in Dubai. He subsequently confessed to plotting an attack against the American embassy in Paris and was extradited to France in September 2001. His network included Kamel Daoudi, a number of other (French) Algerians and three French converts. In multiple court cases, in France and elsewhere, members of this network were sentenced to prison terms between one and 10 years. In The Netherlands, two persons were convicted on terrorism charges. One was a French convert, the other an Algerian living in France.

#### *Plot to threaten Dutch politicians and to make an explosive device*

In September 2004, two youngsters of Moroccan descent were arrested and accused of terrorist activities. On 14 February 2005, a court sentenced one of them, Yehya Kadouri, to 140 days jail and forced admission to a psychiatric institution. He was convicted of publishing death threats on the internet towards Dutch politicians and collecting information and raw materials to make an explosive device. The individual was radicalised almost entirely via the internet.

### *The murder on filmmaker Theo van Gogh*

In spring 2004, against the backdrop of growing anti-Muslim sentiment and increasing radicalisation among certain groups of Muslims, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service issued a clear and unprecedented warning in its report *Background of Jihad Recruits in the Netherlands* (10 March 2004). The report warned about “a growing number of Muslims who feel [that they are] treated disrespectfully by opinion-makers and opinion-leaders... In addition, from their perspective, the government’s attitude is [either] not impartial enough or not impartial at all.” These feelings were deeply shared by a small group of radical Islamists, but they also existed among the larger community of Muslim individuals who felt loyal to the democratic principles of the Dutch state. In particular, young second-generation and third-generation Muslim immigrants appeared to feel strongly about the alleged alienation between society and Muslim citizens. In particular, it was found that this group of Muslim youth felt that they were treated disrespectfully, which potentially made them a vulnerable target for radicalisation and possibly recruitment efforts.

One of these opinion-makers was the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, who had earned a reputation in the Netherlands as an outspoken provocateur. In his short film *Submission*, shown on Dutch television, van Gogh adopted an adversarial stance concerning Islamism. It challenged the abuse of women in the Islamic world based on verses from the Koran, which were projected onto the bodies of naked women wearing only veils. A Dutch parliamentary deputy, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a woman of Muslim Somali origin, wrote the script. A member of the liberal Freedom and Democracy Party, Hirsi Ali is a known critic of Islamism. Following the showing of the film *Submission*, both Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh received death threats via the internet.

One such individual who took the issuance of these threats very seriously was a young man of Moroccan descent by the name of Muhammad Bouyeri, who was born in 1978 and raised in the Netherlands. Friends and acquaintances described him as a shy but intelligent man (Alberts 2005). Bouyeri had been an eager and successful student in secondary school (Benschop 2005) and easily advanced on to studying at college. Nevertheless, although he started several studies he never finished any of them until finally, after five years, he dropped out of college all together (Vermaat 2005, 2006). In

the same period, his mother died and a number of his ideas to improve the situation of youngsters in his neighbourhood failed to get the support of the authorities. For whatever precise reason, he started to become radicalised. He spent months attempting to gain a more in-depth knowledge of Islam and radical interpretations of the Koran. Often, he would lock himself up in his home and sit behind his computer for hours, downloading, reading and translating radical Islamist texts, writing articles and distributing his work via the internet under a pseudonym. Meanwhile, Bouyeri became embedded in a network of similar-minded peers all of whom frequented the same mosque and met at regular basis at Bouyeri's home to discuss Islam-related issues. During these meetings, Bouyeri played videos of decapitations in the Middle East and attempted to persuade his friends to participate in violent jihad against the West (Alberts et al. 2005).

By the summer of 2003, Bouyeri had become so radicalised that he even rejected the most prototypical orthodox al-Tawhid Mosque as being too liberal. In his radicalisation, Bouyeri adopted an ideology contending that violence against both non-believers and moderate Muslims – often characterised as renegades – was justified. On 2 November 2004, Bouyeri assassinated Theo van Gogh. In a threat letter, which he stabbed with a knife to Van Gogh's body, Bouyeri expressed anger and disgust against Western societies and their governments' foreign policies. He accused the Dutch Liberal Party of being anti-Islamic and accused Member of Parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali of terrorising Islam (Jansen 2005). Bouyeri was apprehended by police while attempting to die a martyr's death – a fact confirmed by a farewell letter, which was found on him. While Bouyeri may have failed to become a martyr, he succeeded in underscoring the home-grown terrorist threat to the Netherlands.

Soon after the murder of Van Gogh, it became clear that although Bouyeri proclaimed to have acted independently, he was one of the central figures in the Hofstadgroep. The event very much shocked the Netherlands. It became obvious that extreme ideologies as vented by Al-Qaeda and other radical terrorist organisations had gained ground in the Netherlands, even among those born and raised in the country. It also became clear that radicalism among Muslims in the Netherlands had a 'home-grown' terrorist dimension that could no longer be ignored, as had been the case with the Kadouri case and a number of other thwarted plots.

### *Violent arrests and convictions*

In the investigation following the murder of Van Gogh, the police arrested several youngsters allegedly embedded in the radical network surrounding Bouyeri. Approximately one week after Bouyeri's arrest, the police set out to investigate a building in a neighbourhood called the Laakkwartier in The Hague. Jason Walters and Ismail Akhnikh, two members of the Hofstadgroep, were inside the building. One of them threw a grenade at the police, injuring four police officers of whom two were seriously hurt. The incident was the start of a 14-hour stand-off during which several attempts to arrest the suspects failed. Ultimately, the police used tear gas to force the two suspects out of the building and shot one in the shoulder.

In the year following the murder of Van Gogh, more than a dozen alleged members of the Hofstadgroep stood trial. In March 2006, the court convicted nine of them and sentenced them to between one and 15 years imprisonment. In its verdict, the court stated that the Hofstadgroep aimed at destroying existing Dutch structures and terrorising Dutch society. At that time, Bouyeri was already sentenced to life imprisonment in a separate court case.

### *Plot to prepare a terrorist attack and attempt to recruit a fellow-prisoner*

In February 2006, Bilal Lamrani, a young Dutch Muslim was given a three-year sentence (LJN: AV1652, Rechtbank Rotterdam, 10/600017-05; Buro Jansen & Jansen 2006; NOS Journaal 2006; De Telegraaf 2004; Benschop 2005). According to the court in Rotterdam, Lamrani was preparing a terrorist attack and had tried to recruit a fellow prisoner while in jail for threatening a leading Dutch Member of Parliament. In his home, the police found hundreds of (digital) copies of radical Islamist texts and information on how to make explosive devices. The 21-year old had close contact with some members of the Hofstadgroep and Mohammed Bouyeri who murdered Theo van Gogh.

### *Plot to attack politicians and a government building*

Samir Azzouz, a long-time suspect of terrorism, was arrested with nine others in October 2005, on suspicion of preparing terrorist attacks on politicians and a government building. Azzouz was close to most of the members of the Hofstadgroep. One of the other

suspects in this case had already been sentenced for membership of the Hofstadgroep. Of the 10 persons arrested in October 2005, three were convicted. As mentioned earlier, Azzouz and the other two were given sentences for membership of an organisation with terrorist intentions, for preparing a terrorist attack and for their recruiting activities.

### *Dutch jihadi terrorists abroad*

Besides the loose-knit, home-grown terrorist networks, the Netherlands has been confronted with a number of locally embedded international networks controlled from abroad, or in a manner whereby foreign recruiters residing in the Netherlands play a key role. These networks and recruiters have managed to find young Muslims in the Netherlands willing and able to go on jihad. In the past decade, two of them, associated with a radical Salafi mosque in the city of Eindhoven, died in Kashmir. Some Dutch Muslims are believed to be fighting in Iraq. Six of them, from the city of The Hague, were ostensibly on a journey to Chechnya or Dagestand. Religious leaders and family members successfully persuaded them to return from Azerbaijan and not to continue their assumed journey. It is not clear whether this ‘trip’ was organised by an internationally operating network or a more autonomously decided ‘adventure’. The latter seemed to have been the case with the earlier mentioned failed attempt by Samir Azzouz to join the jihad in Chechnya.

### **3.2 *Non-Muslims versus Muslims***

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, growing anti-Muslim sentiments in reaction to cases such as the al-Moumni affair escalated. Newspaper reports about a group of nine adolescents of Moroccan descent “celebrating” the terrorist attacks caused public fury and rendered substantial damage to the image of Muslims in the Netherlands. In addition, a series of arrests of suspected Islamist terrorists led some to question the loyalty of Muslim communities towards the Dutch state, norms and values. Spurious findings by opinion polls employing questionable methodologies further added fuel to the fire by fostering the notion that there was indeed a lack of loyalty exhibited in the Dutch Muslim population. Moreover, in the weeks following the attacks, the media revealed many scandals and potential threats, thereby exacerbating the situation. For example, there was

a report about propaganda in Islamic schools that glorified terrorism and quoted from radical anti-Western speeches by Salafi imams. Although many of these reports later turned out to be based on hearsay or misinterpretations of texts and events, with most of the suspected terrorists being released within days or weeks, the damage had already been done.

The impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the previously mentioned incidents was profound, resulting in a tougher tone of debate. While in the past, few in the Netherlands dared to speak out against Islamist radicalism, the Dutch community suddenly became unbridled in its (often negative) expressions regarding Islamism.

A number of public opinion polls in the months following these attacks consequently revealed strong anti-Muslim sentiment and a fear of Islam. One survey indicated that about three-quarters of the Dutch population were in favour of providing military support to the United States. At the same time, 60% also feared that this might lead to terrorist attacks in the Netherlands. Another poll showed that a clear majority of the Dutch wanted to expel Muslims with anti-Western opinions from the country. A survey among Muslims that appeared in a multi-cultural weekly further fed these opinions and fears. The results of the survey showed that the majority of those interviewed believed there was at least some justification for the attacks on the United States.

### *Pim Fortuyn*

As the relationship between non-Muslims and Muslims in the Netherlands grew increasingly tense, the flamboyant right-wing Pim Fortuyn entered the Dutch political arena. Being a former member of the Social-Democratic Party, he became the head of the populist party *Leefbaar Nederland* (Liveable Netherlands) in 2001. Fortuyn, who was openly gay and appeared to enjoy controversy, was forced to leave this party after some very provocative statements regarding Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands. More specifically, he emphasised that the Netherlands should put a hold on immigrant flows from, in particular, Islamic countries. He proclaimed that if he were to be elected into the next government, he would grant citizenship to large groups of Muslims already residing in the Netherlands, but at the same time would heavily restrict Muslim influx. He



considered Islam a backward culture that had never undergone a period of Enlightenment and was therefore unfit to integrate into modern western societies (Poorthuis and Wansink 2002).

After being rejected by LN, Fortuyn founded his own political party, Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF) in February 2002, and was running for the upcoming governmental elections that were to be held in May that year. During his political career, Fortuyn continued to make provocative statements, hereby fuelling existing tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. The taboo on conservatism and right-wing politics seemed to disappear, and Fortuyn appeared to have triggered a revival of extreme-right lobbying groups and organisations. On 6 May 2002, approximately one week prior to the governmental elections for which he was running, Pim Fortuyn was assassinated after having given a radio-interview in Hilversum. Initially, the common assumption among the Dutch public seemed to be that Fortuyn had become the victim of radical Islamists seeking revenge for his anti-Islam statements. Even though it was soon publicised that Fortuyn's murderer, Volkert van der Graaf, was a left-wing environmental activist, the killing of Fortuyn increased the tension between Dutch and non-Dutch populations, particularly focusing on Muslims. During the days after the murder, representatives of the radical right-wing vented anti-Islam sentiments and in cities in the eastern part of the country incidents were reported of harassment of immigrant youngsters by right-wing extremists (NRC Handelsblad 2003). Despite the assassination, the elections continued one week later with Fortuyn as a posthumous candidate winning 26 out of 150 seats in the Parliament. Nevertheless, the LPF's success was not to remain; after the next elections in 2004, it lost 18 seats and by 2006, the party was elected out of the parliament. Ultimately, the party fell apart by January 2008. Nevertheless, although Fortuyn's political career was relatively short, his provocative statements contributed significantly to the debate about multiculturalism in general and multiculturalism in the Netherlands in particular.

#### *Violent reactions to the Van Gogh murder*

Immediately after the murder of Van Gogh, the authorities realised it might provoke violent reactions by non-Muslims, but they did not react with a strong statement urging

everyone to remain calm. And the situation did not remain calm. Dutch society was shocked not only by the crime itself, but also by the manner in which the basic principles of the Netherlands' democratic constitutional state had been so brutally attacked. Not only did Dutch society exhibit outrage over the murder, but many also sought violent revenge against 'those Muslims'. Youngsters with racist and right-wing ideas exploited the situation to incite hatred and violence against Moroccans, Muslims and immigrants in general. As Albert Benschop elaborates in *Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold*, "the Islam-inspired murder of van Gogh was grist to the political mill of extremely nationalist and racist groups... [who] seized the event to give vent to their violent and venomous opinions." (Benschop 2005) Consequently, the Netherlands has witnessed a growing climate of intolerance in its non-Muslim community followed by increased episodes of attacks against Muslims and cases of discrimination. In the days following the murder of the film maker, there were more than 100 incidents of arson and assault directed at mosques, Islamic schools and individual Muslims. In reaction, young Muslims also attacked a number of churches and individuals.

#### *Attacks by right-wing youngsters*

In the context of the inflamed racial tensions that followed the Van Gogh murder, right-wing extremists launched a renewed assault on the Dutch Muslim communities in 2005. In particular, the so-called 'Lonsdale youth' received extensive attention by the media as well as by politicians. Lonsdale is a popular clothing brand among right-wing elements of the 'gabber' youth, a subgroup that is largely defined by a preference for house music. In a study of the Lonsdale issue, Van Donselaar (2006) concluded that the Lonsdale subgroup is very diverse in both nature and size. Between 2002 and 2005, the authors counted more than 100 groups in the Netherlands that were either right-wing-oriented or had been involved in extreme right-wing or racist incidents. After a fight between right-wing and immigrant youngsters in Venray and an attack on an Islamic primary school in Uden, early in 2005, the Intelligence Service started an investigation into Lonsdale youth (AIVD 2005). In the report, the Service concluded that at present, Lonsdale youth do not pose a considerable threat to the democratic order, and that the subgroup mostly consists of unorganised, loosely-knit structures that are not defined by political ideologies. The

threat for society is mostly long term, in the sense that provocative statements and symbolism prompt frequent confrontations with immigrant youngsters and can erode social cohesion and multicultural relations within the Dutch society.

### *Geert Wilders*

In recent years, Member of Parliament Geert Wilders has made a name for himself as the leading politician on immigration and integration issues. Many Muslims (and non-Muslims) perceive MP Geert Wilders as having an anti-Muslim agenda. The earlier-mentioned movie “Fitna” was not his first provocative statement concerning Islam. Other well-known statements of his include comparing the immigration of Muslims with a tsunami wave, comparing the Koran with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* accompanied with a plea for a ban on the Koran, and questioning the ‘loyalty’ of Dutch politicians with a Moroccan or Turkish background. His alleged anti-Muslim attitude and remarks have led to several charges against Wilders for inciting hatred of Muslims or insulting them. He was never convicted in court, however, and repeatedly has stated that he respects the rule of law. Nonetheless, he is generally regarded as contributing to a harsh, polarised debate on the integration of Muslim communities in the Netherlands. The popularity of Geert Wilders and his ideas did result in his Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party For Freedom) winning nine (out of 150) seats in Parliament.

### **3.3 Muslims versus Muslims**

#### *Kurds and Turks*

There are many different levels and types of tensions and violent conflicts between Muslims. If we look at incidents between Muslim communities, the most striking ones are of a political nature, especially concerning tensions and violence between Turks and Kurds. Both have their own groups and organisations. Think of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) or the Turkish nationalist ‘Grey Wolves’. This is not to say that tensions and incidents are always ‘formally’ organised through groups like these. There are also quite a number of locally organised or ‘spontaneous’ incidents, such as provocative behaviour of young Kurds in front of a Turkish coffeehouse just after an important European football match in which *Galatasaray* or *Besiktas* were beaten. In addition, the invasion of

Turkish troops in Iraq in early 2008 caused an increase of tensions between the two groups, both accusing the other of terrorism and organising protest meetings or demonstrations. There have been a number of arson bombings of Turkish and Kurdish targets. However, it remains unclear whether these incidents were of a political nature or criminals fighting criminals. The latter type of tensions and violence is perhaps one of the most serious ones, at least in terms of people killed or injured, but falls beyond the scope of this study.

### *Customary and pseudo-religious violence*

Within some Muslim communities, dramatic incidents have occurred involving family members beating up and even killing girls and women. These ‘honour crimes’ have added to the earlier-mentioned association between Muslims and radical behaviour and violence, in particular towards women. Of course, this kind of pseudo-religious behaviour not only gives Islam and the Muslim communities a bad-image problem, but it is also a very serious social problem within communities – between generations. The problem is even more serious within families – between parents and children and between couples of which one partner is born and raised in the Netherlands and the other is the ‘imported’ partner.

Whereas in the past, these kinds of crimes were more or less ignored or considered as crimes of passion, today they are given widespread attention in the media and receive special attention by social workers, the police and public prosecutors. The exact number of honour crimes is unknown but in recent years, more than a dozen cases have led to hefty debates, including in Parliament. In fact, political parties are currently pushing the authorities to restart investigations into the murder of a young Kurdish woman by her ex-husband (who committed suicide immediately after killing her).

### **Conclusions**

In recent decades, the world has witnessed a trend of globalisation that brought forth an increase in interaction, interdependency and networking between social groups. However, one of the side effects of these developments is that they also led to an increased awareness of social heterogeneity. Cultural diversity becomes increasingly salient, not

only across borders but also within them. For social groups with different values, different norms, different historical backgrounds and different beliefs to coexist peacefully, it is important that they can agree on a basic set of common rules and values and that there is a minimum level of mutual respect and understanding.

In the Netherlands, many different cultural, ethnic and religious groups have lived together peacefully and successfully for decades. The country has experienced hardly any violence between social groups. In contrast to countries like France and the United Kingdom, the Netherlands has not been confronted with many serious terrorist attacks. There have not been riots like those in Paris or Bradford, and there have not been violent confrontations with extreme-right groups like there have been in Germany. In other words, the Dutch experience with inter-group violent conflict is, fortunately, rather limited.

However, in recent years, a few incidents and developments have occurred that have led to tensions and conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims and that have eroded the idea of the Netherlands as a peaceful and tolerant country. This new image of the Netherlands as a place of harsh debates, polarisation and violence did not only take root outside the country, but also among many Dutch citizens. There are as yet no convincing explanations of how and why this happened. The single incidents that probably added to the polarised political and social climate are the attacks on the United States in 2001, the 'discoveries' by the media of extreme radical behaviour among Muslims and the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004. These and other incidents inflamed inter-cultural and inter-ethnic tensions between different social groups and have led, in some occasions, to violent outbursts. They also contributed to political polarisation over issues related to Muslims (and other immigrants), as well as to the implicit association that presently seems to be easily made between Muslims and violence. The fact that the release of the anti-Islam movie 'Fitna' did not lead to angry responses by Muslim communities may indicate two things. Either the idea of intolerance and polarisation has been exaggerated, or that Dutch society has gradually rediscovered its traditions and the importance of adhering to common rules and values and showing a minimum level of mutual respect and understanding. Probably it is a bit of both.

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