



Forensic researchers work outside an Islamic school in Eindhoven, November 8, 2004. A bomb ripped through the school that morning, causing serious damage to the entrance, but no injuries, police said.

EPA/ROBERT VOS/LANDOV

# Lions of Tawhid in the Polder

Paul Aarts and Fadi Hirzalla

**The murder of the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a radical Islamist youth induced a deep national trauma in the Netherlands. Very quickly, debate about the murder and the subsequent outbreak of anti-Muslim violence led to a larger and disturbing debate about the place of Muslims and Islam in the traditionally tolerant country—and the meaning of tolerance itself.**

**T**he second of November 2004 delivered a rude shock to Dutch society—long viewed by itself and by others as the most liberal and tolerant in Europe. Early in the morning on that day, a radical Islamist named Mohammed Bouyeri awaited the filmmaker and provocateur Theo van Gogh near his residence in Amsterdam. When he spotted Van Gogh on his bike heading to work, Bouyeri shot and stabbed him multiple times before pinning a five-page letter

to his chest with a knife. The letter was addressed to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born ex-Muslim and a member of the Dutch parliament who had collaborated with Van Gogh on his latest film, *Submission*, which the two of them made to “draw attention to the oppression of women in Islam.” In the film, a woman appears veiled but semi-nude, her body covered with whiplash marks and Qur’anic verses. “You mince no words about your hostility to Islam,” Bouyeri’s letter to

Hirsi Ali read, “and for this your masters have rewarded you with a seat in Parliament.”

Reaction to the murder instantly evoked the latent but ever-present lack of trust and understanding between citizens of Dutch descent and the country’s growing Muslim population, both immigrant and native-born. On the very same evening, tens of thousands of mainly “white” demonstrators gathered in the main square of Amsterdam. “We don’t accept this!” they shouted—and many seemed to be referring to more than the murder itself. Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende bought his cabinet members the rubber orange bracelets being sold throughout the country as a symbol of national unity. The mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, emphasized in a November 3 speech that “we should all try to stick together.” But trouble could not be contained.

Mosques were set on fire and daubed with racist graffiti. Muslim merchants in Amsterdam received threatening letters, and Islamic schools were lit on fire or targeted with bombs. Researchers at the Anne Frank Foundation counted over 100 racially motivated attacks directed at the Muslim community in the weeks after the murder. Churches were attacked as well. Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, a vociferously anti-immigrant parliamentarian, sought refuge in secret and heavily secured places. Watching from across the border, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt breathlessly warned of a “potential civil war” along religious lines.

The Van Gogh incident did not unleash a civil war—far from it—but it did induce a deep and ongoing national trauma. Dutch society “seems as if it has lost its anchor,” Cohen recently lamented.<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh was the second major public figure in two years to be killed; in 2002, the controversial right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn was murdered by an animal rights activist. But in 2004, assessments of what went wrong took a very different direction—toward Islam and the alleged failure of Muslims to integrate into Dutch society. The Van Gogh killing, indeed, amplified the voices of right-leaning Dutch who accuse “imported” Islamic culture of being by definition illiberal or intolerant and portray the life ways of the large Muslim population as inimical to Dutch society. Such a “culturalist” way of understanding the murder ignores a salient set of facts about Mohammed Bouyeri—for example, that he was born, raised and educated in the liberal Netherlands.

## A Multicultural Society

The Netherlands owes its ethnically plural society to a colonial past, the recruitment of “guest workers,” and an influx of economic and political refugees. According to the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics, about 3 million of the total population of 16.3 million are “allochthonous”—a term from Dutch sociol-

ogy meaning “not of Dutch descent.” Of that number, about 920,000 (5.7 percent of the population) are Muslims, predominantly of Moroccan and Turkish origin.<sup>2</sup> When Moroccan and Turkish guest workers first arrived in the 1960s, they believed, as the Dutch government did, that their presence would be temporary. After earning some money, they would return home. In general, they were not inspired to learn to speak Dutch or otherwise integrate into society, and the Dutch government did not encourage them to do so.

In the 1970s, however, most guest workers decided to bring over their wives and children to build a permanent life in the Netherlands. For the most part lacking Dutch language skills or significant education, the immigrants were at a socio-economic disadvantage. From the 1980s, the Dutch government tried to help minorities with programs aiming to increase “social capital” within each ethnic sub-community—providing professional education in the Turkish language, for example. This “pillar model,” or multicultural model, was distinct from the assimilation strategy pursued by other European states to enhance the education levels and job skills of immigrant communities. Whereas assimilation posits that immigrants’ ethnic and cultural identities will fade as they integrate into the dominant culture, the pillar model assumes that minorities can reach socio-economic equality with the majority while holding on to distinct communal cultures. Though the pillar model proved fairly successful, it was replaced in the 1990s by another strategy of building “generalized social capital,” so that professional education, for example, was now provided in the Dutch language. The ideal of multiculturalism, however, was not abandoned. The new policy has proven less successful and even risks reversing the progress, meager as it was, of the 1980s and the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

The effects of the gaps in income, wealth, education and status between autochthonous and allochthonous Dutch should not be overdramatized. In January 2004, the Blok parliamentary commission concluded that the overall socio-economic integration of ethnic minorities is not that bad. “The integration of many allochthonous has succeeded, which is a great achievement. Notwithstanding the abstemious governmental coordination, significant results have been recorded in integration of neighborhoods, labor and education.” But it remains true that, on average, Moroccans and Turks have fewer job skills, lower-paid jobs and less professional education than “autochthonous” Dutch—citizens of Dutch descent. Unemployment is higher among Moroccans and Turks.<sup>4</sup> Like other minorities, they have more brushes with the law than do autochthonous Dutch.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, women from ethnic minorities are overrepresented in shelters for mistreated women.<sup>6</sup> In the last several years, right-wing politicians, in particular, have used these social indicators to mount a challenge to the dominant consciousness of multiculturalism and state policies on immigration and integration. Increasingly, they have begun to ask what culture and religion have to

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**Around 500 Muslims demonstrate against violence in The Hague four days after the murder of Theo van Gogh.**

JOOST VAN DEN BROEK/HOLLANDE HOOGTE/LAIF

do with unemployment and crime. While xenophobia in the Netherlands is equal opportunity, Muslims have faced much greater scrutiny than others of late.

Increasingly, the Dutch right and sympathetic commentators have contended that Dutch multiculturalism masks what is in fact a clash of cultures. They seized upon homophobic statements by Khalil al-Moumni, the Moroccan-born imam of the al-Nasr mosque in Rotterdam and not a terribly important religious or political leader, to justify their claims. The imam publicly declared that “homosexuality is a contagious disease which threatens humanity with extinction” and that “Europeans are lower than pigs and dogs for tolerating this disease.”<sup>7</sup> Later, much was made of a booklet called *The Path of the Muslim*, disseminated in the al-Tawhid mosque in Amsterdam, which suggested that “homosexuals should be thrown head first out of the highest building in town.”<sup>8</sup>

## Inclination to Islamophobia

Following the September 11, 2001 and Madrid terrorist attacks, and the estimate by Dutch intelligence that “one or two hundred” Dutch Muslims embrace some form of radical Islamist ideology, strident criticisms of Islam and Muslims gained more and more popularity. In a process whereby socioeconomic gaps exacerbated the sense of the cultural or religious

“otherness” of the Muslim population, other public figures felt able to join Pim Fortuyn in denouncing multiculturalism or Islam altogether. The critics of multiculturalism argue that they merely give voice to unspoken popular antipathy to Islam and Muslims and that they are exposing grave problems that have been hidden by the Dutch government for decades.

Frits Bolkestein, a prominent member of the center-right Peoples’ Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), was one of the first to deprecate Islam in public, calling it a “retarded religion” in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> The late Fortuyn, leader of a vocal right-wing party, concurred, describing Islam as “a retarded culture.”<sup>10</sup> Warning of the “threat” posed by this culture, he advised the Netherlands to enlist in a “cold war against Islam.”<sup>11</sup> Hilbrand Nawijn, a member of Fortuyn’s party and the former minister of integration, proposed to “kick criminal Moroccans out of the country.”<sup>12</sup> After the release of the Blok commission report, Nawijn called for reducing the number of satellite dishes in the country because the foreign-language broadcasts they pick up are “bad for integration.”

Culturalist statements are not exclusive to the right. Rob Oudkerk, another Social Democrat, was caught complaining to the Amsterdam mayor Cohen about the “fucking Moroccans” in his city.<sup>13</sup> But figures associated with the right have gone the furthest in their prescriptions and used the coarsest language. Wilders, who was recently dismissed as a member

of the VVD and considers himself to be heir to Fortuyn's ideology, argues that "we should stop importing the Islamic culture" because, among other reasons, "Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy."<sup>14</sup> Hirs Ali, also a member of the VVD, has said that "Islam should be investigated more, since Muslims are involved in almost all contemporary wars"<sup>15</sup> and argued that the prophet Muhammad is "a tyrant and a pervert in comparison to our modern Western values."<sup>16</sup> It was left to Theo van Gogh himself to dub Muslims "sheep-fuckers" and to equate Allah with "a pig."<sup>17</sup>

The stronger public demands regarding the integration of allochthonous Muslims have been reflected in government policy. In 1998, a new law required all new immigrants to complete a course including lessons in Dutch language and the basic organization of Dutch society. Since then, immigration and naturalization have become progressively more difficult. Although right-wing parties were not solely responsible for this policy shift, it is now justified and intensified in cultural terms, whereas previous governments preferred socio-economic terms.<sup>18</sup>

Leftist and Christian parties have opposed this culturalism. They accuse the anti-immigrant politicians of rendering the integration debate cultural and theological—thereby introducing a "clash" into Dutch society that was not previously there. Many Muslims explain the criminal acts and radicalization of some young Muslims as the result of the emerging Islam-bashing discourse, as well as long-standing discrimination in the labor market and in public places like discos and bars. In any case, a 2004 survey conducted by the research office TNS NIPO indicated that most citizens of Dutch descent do not engage in any kind of social activity with Moroccans or Turks, and that only 14 percent have a positive idea of them.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Mohammed Bouyeri committed his crime in a country where Islam is under ideological siege and Moroccans and Turks, both immigrant and native-born, suffer cultural harassment.

## Swatch

Right-wing politicians used the Van Gogh murder to step up their rhetoric against Islam and Muslims. A faint voice from the political left warned against equating Islam with the violence of one radical, but the right voices were far more resonant. Wilders—using his website to declare a "super-war with ten percent of the Muslims in the Netherlands"—gained remarkable support for a new party that he will soon establish. Surveys indicated that if elections had been held in November or December 2004, Wilders would have won 20–30 of the 150 seats in the Dutch parliament.<sup>20</sup> Though no one had thought of Fortuyn's murder in this way, all of a sudden the term "terrorism" was associated with the killing of Van Gogh. Wilders encouraged the association by coining the term "street terrorism" to describe street crime committed by Muslims. Many of Dutch descent, it is clear, regard all Muslims as potential

menaces to society until they prove otherwise by crying at the top of their lungs that they disapprove of violence. These people yearn for a zero tolerance policy for tackling the "green peril." To this end, Wilders even proposes to change Dutch constitutional law "to fight Muslim terror" and to retreat from the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Minister of Integration Rita Verdonk of the VVD exemplifies a revived shallowness in popular attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. On television she opined that "Muslims have lesser capacity to absorb critique than the Dutch," implying that she does not think of Muslims as Dutch citizens.<sup>21</sup> A week or so later, she went to visit imams in the town of Tilburg. When one of them refused to shake hands with her (because "Islam forbids me to do so with women"), Verdonk reacted indignantly: "But why? We are equals, aren't we?"<sup>22</sup> Later, she defended a woman of Dutch descent who rammed her car into a native Moroccan who had tried to steal her purse. The Moroccan died of his wounds, but Verdonk and other politicians pleaded the woman's innocence. If these incidents do not reveal prejudice on Verdonk's part, they are, at the very least, awfully clumsy things for a minister of integration to say.

The murder of Van Gogh also afforded additional space in the media to a bevy of self-appointed intellectual critics of Islam, who have aired a familiar litany of accusations, such as "Islam is detrimental to democracy," "Islam has not been purified by enlightened thinking" and "Islam does not accept a division between church and state." Herman Philipse, a professor at Utrecht University, claimed on the "Barend and Van Dorp" talk show that "almost all terror comes from Muslims. The Qur'an states that...atheists must be killed and there is no one liberal Islamic theology that claims Muslims should not understand this literally." Afshin Ellian, an Iranian-born lecturer at Leiden University, suggested on the "Netwerk" program on the evening of the murder that Muslims worship a "perverse God." He then issued a summons to fellow guest Mohammed Benzakour, a Muslim publicist regarded as liberal, to "call upon his people to behave themselves. It is jihad!" In rebuttal, Benzakour rightly wondered why similar calls were not heard when Fortuyn was killed by someone of Dutch descent. As one journalist later wrote: "Are Catholics called to account when the IRA commits crimes?"<sup>23</sup>

Referring to Ellian's numerous television appearances and Hirs Ali's popularity among autochthonous Dutch, one imam remarked that they should not be taken seriously merely because they are born in Islamic countries. "It is the same thing as asking any Swiss to repair your Swatch: not all Swiss are expert Swatch repairers."<sup>24</sup> Nearly all Dutch Muslims regard Ellian and Hirs Ali as Uncle Toms who are "howling along with the wolves," as Benzakour once observed. Those few Muslims who paid attention to *Submission* were repulsed by it.

The debate over the murder of Van Gogh reinforced the tendency of recent years to cast political questions in morally

normative rather than analytical terms. But culturalist analysis, with its two categories of “modern Western” and “imported” culture and values, cannot explain how was it that Mohammed Bouyeri became willing to kill.

## Soul Searching

Known among his peers at school as quiet and intelligent, Bouyeri, 26, is a Dutch-born Moroccan with an ambiguous history. After graduating from secondary school, he went to college but ceased studying when his mother died of cancer in 2002. After serving seven months in jail for battery, he came out a religious man. His behavior, language, beliefs and attire became “Islamic,” and he grew a beard. He joined a local community center where he organized grassroots activities for the Moroccan youth of his pauperized neighborhood in West Amsterdam. Dutch intelligence suspected Bouyeri of belonging to a radical Islamist cell that it calls the “Hofstad Group.” They kept him under surveillance up to October 21, 2004, but found no indication that he would kill Van Gogh just 12 days later.

There are several factors that might have contributed to Bouyeri’s radicalization beyond the alienating effects of exclusion from the labor market and other discrimination. Contrary to what is generally assumed, young “second-generation” allochthonous Muslims frequently do not retain a “foreign” communal identity so much as they are troubled by a lack of identity. The conservative cultural and religious practices of their parents prove unattractive to many, as they do not mesh with the sexual mores, hedonism, individualism and materialism of the dominant Dutch youth culture. Assuming a “native Dutch” identity is not an easy solution, however, for to some extent the second generation does feel religiously Islamic and culturally Moroccan or Turkish, exactly the identity traits that are not smiled upon in an increasingly xenophobic Holland. Just as many Dutch Muslim youths blame their lack of social capital primarily on the government or on the prejudice of autochthonous society, so they also regard government policy and, in particular, popular discourse about Muslims and Islam as corrosive for their sense of self. Many wonder: Who am I? To whom do I belong?

Even as their parents’ “traditional” identity lingers in their souls, many second-generation youth experience an identity vacuum that they fill with new senses of self that express overt alienation from the society as a whole. Especially in the ghettos of the largest cities, a disproportionate number of young Muslims (in comparison to autochthonous Dutch of the same age) resign themselves to that alienation and adopt what might be called a “bad Moroccan/Turkish” attitude in order to be and to belong. The attitude might be roughly summarized this way: I am a Moroccan or a Turkish Muslim and I am proud of it. Now, let’s have a beer and hit on girls. These are the youths denigrated by many “white” Dutch as

delinquents—and it is not surprising that some of them choose to act the part.

Much more rarely, young soul-searching Muslims choose another feeling of belonging, another panacea for their agonies. If they are intelligent, persistent, ambitious, energetic and therefore disillusioned and furious enough, and if they come into contact with radical Islamist ideology (through the Internet or recruiters), they just may prove susceptible to it. According to a report from the Dutch intelligence service, “Feelings of lacking self-esteem...and identity may make young Muslims susceptible to radical jihad recruiters.”<sup>25</sup> Images of oppressed Palestinians and bombed Iraqis may provide an extra stimulus to embrace a militant salafi credo: God is my goal, the prophet is my example, the Qur’an is my constitution, jihad is my way and martyrdom is my highest desire.<sup>26</sup> This handful of soul-searchers becomes not just “born-again Muslims”—a term much used by Olivier Roy<sup>27</sup>—but radicals who believe they have a divine license to kill. While their credo bears resemblance to that of militants elsewhere, it is essentially homemade. These “lions of *tawhid*,” as the press claims the small and unorganized Hofstad Group calls itself,<sup>28</sup> roared when Theo van Gogh mocked their set of beliefs so continuously and vulgarly—and the courts found his mockery to be within the bounds of Dutch law. It is reprehensible, but sadly not that surprising in the current Dutch socio-political culture, that a radical chose a response to Van Gogh’s vulgarity that is so far beyond the law.

## Differences to Tolerate

Such radicalism does not occur in a social or historical vacuum, nor does it grow out of something non-existent called “the” Islam. An “inner world” of individuals inclined toward violence comes about in particular times, in particular places and in particular relations with the “outer world.”

The preservation of Dutch multicultural society may require security measures to protect against existing radicalism, but more importantly it requires measures to prevent the growth of more radicalism. Such measures include the socio-economic development of the Muslim pillar of Dutch society, but also the cessation of “culturalist” discourse and discriminatory conduct. Muslim-bashers in the Netherlands claim that it is their rights that are under attack, that right-wing politicians (and even Van Gogh) are heroes of “free speech” whom the forces of political correctness would arbitrarily silence. Of course, the right of free speech must be upheld, including with regard to women’s rights under Islam, but the protections of free speech in Dutch law were never intended to protect the right to incite discrimination against people because of their culture or religion. Nor, obviously, does the law classify some cultures or religions as inferior to “white” Dutch cultures or Christianity.

Fortunately, the fulminations of the right wing were not the only Dutch response to the killing of Theo Van Gogh.

