

The Netherlands

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The discussion about the position of religious leaders was already ongoing in the Netherlands before 11 September. After the attacks on the US, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims came under further pressure. The media, followed by the Dutch government and social organizations, began assiduously looking for the representatives and the spokespeople of the Muslims. The result was the rolling of Rolodexes with outdated or randomly gathered contacts.

It is remarkable that the Dutch government is interested in Islamic organizations as partners in dialogue primarily in times of crisis. In these difficult times the structural problems of Dutch Islam resurface on the national political scene: the lack of a representative consultative body for both Muslims and the government, the function and position of imams, and the creation of a Dutch training programme for imams (which should provide replacements for the so-called commuter or import imams). Meanwhile, the Dutch government makes management mistakes in times of crisis, placing increased pressure on relations and endangering the integration process of Muslims.

In the public debate on Islam the media plays an important role. Good news, like the unambiguous joint statement of national organizations strongly condemning the attacks, attracts little attention. The interest is focused mainly on more dramatic incidents and views, such as the celebration of the 11 September attacks by Moroccan youths in a rural town and the circulation of a 'hate calendar' among Muslim students. As it appeared, both cases were outright fabrications, but the damage had been done. Moreover, individual Muslims making strong statements came to the fore and some media suggested that the silent majority and its organizations are not very different from these voices. The result was a crisis of confidence between the 'white' Dutch population and Muslims.

How to restore confidence? The most common answer is that Islamic leaders have to fulfil an intermediary role between the Muslim community and the government. They should also act as spokespeople in the media and participate fully in public discussions. This places high demands on their knowledge and skills, and whether the current leaders have these remains to be seen. At the same time, one can honestly ask: Who are the leaders of the Dutch Muslims? Are they the big shots of the Muslim organizations or the imams? Either way, Dutch society approaches Islam and its spiritual leaders from a Christian perspective, and expects the imams to assume the role of spokespersons and fully participate in public debate. The fierce reactions of Dutch politicians and intellectuals to the statements on homosexuality by Imam El-Moumni (see *ISIM Newsletter* 8: 33) and later by a Muslim psychiatric care-worker and part-time imam are not just about the actual content of the statements, but rather about the authority that is unjustly attributed to these people. In the Netherlands imams function mainly within the Muslim communities. Their tasks are closely related to prayer services (leading prayers five times a day, preaching during the weekly Friday meetings) and religious education in mosques. In their countries of origin it would be out of the ordinary for the media to ask their opinion or for them to get mixed up in any kind of social discussion. They are religious leaders more in practical than in theological terms.

El-Moumni made statements about homosexuality without considering the consequences. He has no insight into the relations

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within a society like that of the Netherlands. He was not 'integrated' – on the contrary, he was an 'imported' imam whose contacts in the Netherlands were by and large limited to a local Moroccan community. But what did the Dutch politicians and intellectuals who lashed out at him (to make it clear to him 'how people relate to each other here in the Netherlands') know about the position and authority of imams within the Muslim community? The hefty reactions went on for months and led to a polarization in society. It showed that the role and authority of the imams are clearly overestimated. The entire matter was a clear example of intercultural miscommunication between both parties, which also means that better integration of the imams will solve only one half of the problem.

Is the imam in charge?

Dutch labour regulations consider imams, like ministers and priests, as holders of a clerical position. Their legal (labour) status is not protected by law. The labour conditions of the imams currently working in the Netherlands are far from meeting current standards; not only are imams' working conditions poor, their status as migrants is weak. When an imam has a conflict with his employer (usually the board of the mosque), he risks being sent back immediately to his country of origin. It is clearly not the imam but rather the board members of the mosque association who are in charge.

Imams in the Netherlands are also confronted with another problem in relation to their tasks. An imam is expected to not only fulfil his primary religious functions within the mosque, but to also take on numerous social functions, such as participating in inter-religious meetings and offering moral support. This second category of functions is hardly fulfilled, if at all, by the current imported imams. As a result, the imam loses authority and prestige. He is seen as not being capable of fulfilling his position properly. Not only is the white Dutch population dissatisfied with the imams; their constituents, in particular the young, are too.

In dealing with this problem, an imam training programme in the Netherlands is often presented as a solution. The most important motivation for such a programme is that future imams would gain knowledge of the Dutch language and society. But that is not all. There are two other motives, which equally imply a more all-encompassing vision of the future of Islam in the Netherlands and can at the very least count on broad support. The first motive is that of the emergence of a 'Dutch Islam', i.e. an interpretation of Islamic religious doctrine and ethics that fit this situation of a religious minority in a strongly secularized society. The second reflects the idea that foreign-trained imams would exert a negative influence on the integration of Muslims in Dutch society and that such an influence should be inhibited by an imam training programme in the country. It also means that, in the long term, admission of imams from the Middle East and North Africa would have to be limited, if not stopped.

The motivations behind the call for Dutch-trained imams imply that the role of the imams must comprise more than that of religious counsellor; an intellectual or *'alim* is expected. It would be very difficult to meet

the profile of the imam sketched above through an imam training programme within regular Dutch educational settings. This brings two questions to the fore. Firstly, is an imam training programme necessary to meet the needs of the mosque communities? To this end, a practice-oriented training programme at a higher vocational education level would be sufficient. Secondly, is it imperative to introduce theological Islamic studies which will breed the future Muslim elite? This question is more complicated and can not be answered in isolation from conditions in the Muslim world.

The Muslim community in the Netherlands lacks a strong intellectual elite. With respect to the Turkish immigrants, this derives from their social background as they come mainly from the countryside and tend to have low educational levels. Neither a Muslim intellectual discourse nor an interaction between popular and intellectual Islam exists in the Netherlands. The relations of the Muslim organizations with the country of origin should be understood within this perspective. The lack of a strong intellectual leadership creates a relationship of dependency between Turkish Islam in the Netherlands and Islam in Turkey. It is this relationship of dependency that complicates an autonomous development of Turkish Islam in the Netherlands.

In addition, Muslims, coming from different countries, do not form a homogeneous unit that allows for common action. There are ethnic and regional differences as well as religious and cultural ones. These differences, combined with ethnic power struggles and all sorts of miscommunications, have made it impossible up to now for Muslims to establish a representative body.

Modernization and alienation

Modernity has brought about a crisis in Muslim intellectual leadership that is not easily solved. In very broad lines, we can distinguish two types of intellectuals in contemporary Islamic society. The first is the westernized intellectual, who is oriented towards the West and has to a large degree distanced himself from his religious and cultural heritage. Most of these intellectuals stand for the modernization of their societies along Western lines. This puts them, in fact, in line with modern cultural imperialism. The second type comprises the more traditional *'ulama*, who tend to resist outright westernization and are reluctant to accept religious reforms. Although they have different points of departure and orientation, both *'ulama* and westernized intellectuals are faced with fundamental problems. The latter are often unable to offer solutions for modern questions from within the Islamic tradition and lack popular support. *'Ulama* are familiar with the intellectual traditions of Islam but only few seem capable of translating it into the conditions of modernity. Both westernized intellectuals and *'ulama* find great difficulty in providing leadership in the Muslim world.

In discussions about imam training programmes in the Netherlands, the existence of this crisis affecting the contemporary Muslim world and its relevance to Muslim diasporas are ignored. To solve the intellectual crisis, an increasing number of people place hopes on a new form of leadership that is as yet in its infancy. This new form of

leadership is sometimes called the 'enlightened *'ulama*', comprising persons with extraordinary erudition in the Islamic disciplines in addition to knowledge of the modern sciences and languages. As long as Muslims, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, do not take stock of this alternative profile in the development of their educational model, the current intellectual crisis will persist.

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