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Editorial

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ISIM NEWSLETTER

NAME CHANGE

The name of the *ISIM Newsletter* has been changed to the *ISIM Review* to more accurately reflect the publication's objective of providing a review of debates and research on contemporary Muslim societies and communities in an accessible manner to a broad readership.

DICK DOUWES &
LINDA HERRERA

Western Europe has been struggling to accommodate its Muslim migrants. Politicians and opinion makers often display irritation towards Muslim citizens and those (non-Muslims) who call for reason and restraint in the ever-prevailing critical policy and media debates on Islam. In the Netherlands Islam became publicly visible from the late-1980s following family reunion programmes which allowed women and children from countries such as Morocco and Turkey to join their husbands and fathers. Although Muslims faced some criticism during that period, Islam-bashing only later became a political fashion when Pim Fortuyn put Islam – in his observation a backward culture – on the political agenda. After his violent death and the ensuing spectacular electoral results of his populist party politicians and intellectuals exploited his legacy and came to dominate the Dutch debate. One of the most outspoken critics, Somali born activist and parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali, publicly denounced her Islamic faith (see Moors, p. 8 and Ghorashi, p. 10).

Muslim voices are hardly ever heard in the debate, partly due to the intolerant posture of many of their critics who actively try to limit the space for divergent views, and partly because of the lack of Muslim spokespersons sufficiently backed by the larger community (who speak the language of their opponents). This unbalanced situation has created room for radical and marginal groups to articulate what it means to be Muslim, to the detriment of the more moderate and mainstream voices. The Islam critics have subsequently—and gratuitously—used these voices as proof of their basic assumption that Islam tends toward radicalism and impedes its adherents from becoming responsible citizens. While Islamist radicalism undoubtedly exists in Europe, most Muslims have ordinary daily concerns revolving around family, work, education, relationships, and the future. Yet, by virtue of being Muslim, or Moroccan, or Turkish, or accent speaking, or headscarf wearing, they are assumed to endanger the status quo and are incessantly confronted with demands to denounce, for example, radical imams, jihadist Internet sites, and extremist groups.

The brutal murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a seemingly integrated Dutch citizen of Moroccan origin has made matters worse in that it strengthened the idea that the existence of Muslim communities as a whole constitutes a security risk and that multiculturalism has unequivocally failed.

Yet, as Olivier Roy so astutely argues, Islamic radicalism in Europe should not be viewed as the result of an inherent inflexibility in the culture of Muslim immigrants. Rather, radicalization can be understood as a process of “de-culturalization” of religion in which westernized Muslims and converts “endeavour to reconstruct a ‘pure’ religion outside traditional or Western cultures, outside the very concept of culture itself.” (Roy, p. 6). Seen in this light, one pauses to seriously question the efficacy of disciplining governmental projects for integration currently underway in several European countries. It would seem that policies that strive to provide more equitable access to education and labour markets could serve much more productive ends. It is also becoming more evident that secure spaces for Muslim and other voices to participate in public debates need to be better preserved.

Within a growing climate of alarmist politics, pluralistic democratic spaces for public discussion and debate about and by Muslims in Europe are narrowing. Attempts are being made to silence, rather than engage with, the spectrum of voices. An example of the reluctance to offer adequate space to divergent opinions can be found in the case of Tariq Ramadan. A Swiss citizen of Egyptian background, Ramadan's popularity among Muslim youths in Europe has been steadily growing, yet he is met with suspicion by the political and intellectual elite. For reasons never made clear, the US authorities denied Ramadan the permit to take up a professorship at Notre Dame University, in France his talks are regularly cancelled at the last moment, and a media campaign has been underway to keep him out of the country. In January 2005 the French ambassador to the Netherlands put strong pressure on the organizers and panellists of a public debate in The Hague to cancel Ramadan's participation. Whatever one's opinion of Ramadan—and the opinions vary widely—the attempts to restrict his appearances—without providing any clear explanation as to why—raise serious questions about knowledge production and control and appear entirely incompatible with principles of democratic transparency and civic freedoms. As Beshara Doumani cautions (p. 22-23), knowledge production, particularly when it relates to Islam and Muslim societies, is undergoing new challenges and modes of censorship. An open society can only be safeguarded by maintaining spaces for critical inquiry and debate.

ISIM

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) conducts and promotes interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. The ISIM was established in 1998 by the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, Utrecht University, and Radboud University Nijmegen in response to a need for further research on contemporary developments of great social, political, and cultural importance in the Muslim world from social science and humanities perspectives. The ISIM's research approaches are expressly interdisciplinary and comparative, covering a large geographic range which includes North Africa, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia, and Muslim communities in the West. Broad in scope, the ISIM brings together all areas of disciplinary expertise in anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political science, and cultural studies.

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ADDRESS CHANGE

The ISIM will be relocating its offices in Leiden to **Rapenburg 59** as of **1 April 2005**.