

The Netherlands

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Imams in the Netherlands Home-made Better than Import?

In February 1988, the Dutch government published a policy document on imams and their training.¹ In previous years, it had strongly advocated such training. The policy document was the preliminary conclusion of a – sometimes heated – debate: Who is in control of future imams? Will the Dutch borders be closed to imams from Turkey and Morocco?

The Netherlands counts approximately 700,000 persons of Islamic background. Most belong to immigrant communities from Turkey and Morocco, which settled in the Netherlands in the '60s and '70s. Between 200 and 250 imams are employed (with a salary) in the 380 mosques in the Netherlands; in the smaller houses of prayer the religious leaders are usually unpaid. The majority of professional imams are recruited in the country of origin: Turkey or Morocco. The majority of the Turkish imams have been dispatched by the Directorate for Religious Affairs for a period of four years, at the end of which they return to Turkey. Other imams have been educated in the country of origin, but have settled in the Netherlands permanently.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the external recruitment of imams has been criticized as being an unwelcome foreign influence on the Muslim communities in the Netherlands and as being a hindrance to their integration in society. The Dutch government has ordered several investigations since 1994 and in 1998, produced the above-mentioned policy document concerning imams. The document contains the following aims: 1. Stimulation of a theological institution for the training of imams within the Dutch educational system; 2. Refresher courses for imams who have been educated elsewhere; and 3. Restriction on entry for new imams from abroad if candidates in the Netherlands are available.

On the one hand, Muslim organizations have reacted with criticism to this government policy by pointing to the division between Church and State. On the other hand, they have devised educational structures that may be eligible for recognition and funding of the government.

Motives of Those in Favour

The Dutch government regards this matter from the point of view of integration of ethnic minorities. With this, the government means their participation as full citizens in every aspect of society. With disturbing issues such as increasing juvenile unemployment and juvenile delinquency among certain ethnic minorities, the government intends to develop a social-cultural policy in which religion and 'living principles' are included. The role played by religious leaders, *in casu* the imams, can be positive as well as negative. They can convey norms and values that may frustrate the integration of Islamic migrant communities in Dutch society. *In concreto* this means imams who call on their audience to limit, in as much as possible, contact with the unbelieving infidels; or those who discourage young Muslim women from studying or pursuing a career, based on traditional views on the position of women. It is implicitly assumed that imams who have been trained abroad will propagate such conservative ideas. Apart from that, various government bodies – among them the Dutch Internal Intelligence Service – have voiced their concern that imams could act as instruments by means of which foreign authorities or organizations can control Muslim communities in the Netherlands.

On the other hand, one hopes that imams who have a more positive attitude about the society around them can break the isolation of some Muslim groups, or at least decrease it. The government assumes that imams trained in the Netherlands will be well integrated into society.

The need for a new type of religious leader who is better equipped to work in non-Islamic environments and who is completely independent of foreign governments is also sometimes expressed by Muslims in the Netherlands who are critical towards existing Muslim organizations. They blame the present generation of imams for preaching an Islamic message which too much assumes the self-evidence of the truth of Islam and offers too little possibilities to enter into discourse with the non-Muslim environment. It is especially those Muslims who constructively work together with non-Muslims on a daily basis that oppose the isolationist attitude of some imams. Although not doubting the universal truth of the Islamic teaching, they stress that it is essential to further define and accentuate it in the social and cultural context.

The plea for Dutch imam training is further substantiated by the consideration that Islamic theologians should not only function within the confinements of the mosque but also in other social structures, such as hospitals and correctional facilities. These institutions have a tradition of spiritual care for their clients, which is given from either a Christian, Jewish or humanist perspective. The increased number of Muslims in Dutch hospitals, and also in correctional facilities, justifies the appointment of imams next to the great number of ministers and humanist counsellors. This forms part of the greater structure (hospitals, jails, etc.) and presupposes that the imam works together in a team of people who hold different views. The demands of professionalism placed on Christian or humanist spiritual counsellors have not yet been clearly formulated for 'hospital imams'. However, it is clear that theological training in Turkey or Morocco will not be sufficient for this. Therefore, the pursuit of specialized imams in institutions forms an argument for imam training in the Netherlands.

The last argument for training imams in the Netherlands is simply the need for imams who can speak Dutch and who can preach, lecture and give religious advice in that language. Knowledge of the language of their countries of origin strongly decreases amongst Muslims who grow up in the Netherlands. It is evident that an imam with insufficient knowledge of Dutch is severely handicapped in his communication with people of the second and third generations. Concern about the Islamic training of the future generations is the main impetus for most Muslim organizations that want to train their imams locally.

While the motives for imam training in the Netherlands greatly differ with the various actors, and while also the ideological 'colour' of the training they desire varies widely, the need for local training facilities for imams is shared by many.

Objections of Those Against

Despite the arguments in favour of local imam training, proposals to come to bring this to fruition are strongly objected to by existing Muslim organizations. Apart from that, there is doubt about the feasibility of the proposed training structures.

The opposition is mainly triggered by fear of assimilation in the surrounding environment. As Muslims grow increasingly more opposed to the norms and values of secular society, their mistrust of politicians who promote an Islam adapted to Europe increases as well. Some Muslim organizations fear that a theological training supported by the government will have to make unacceptable concessions to the dominant culture. This fear is vented amongst others through the rejection of a 'West European Islam'. Even though no one would deny that the West European context poses specific challenges for Muslims, the universal, unique and revealed character of the Islamic message, which is not open to concessions, is stressed.

In opposing the government policy in favour of local imam training, antagonists refer to the division of Church and State. Through its imam policy, the government would involve itself in the internal affairs of a religious organization. Even though the division of Church and State in the Netherlands is more an ideological image than it is descriptive of the actual situation, it has almost gained the status of a dogma. That is why the government, in its policy document, stresses that it does not want to violate that division in its proposals. It claims only to facilitate the conditions under which the Muslims themselves can create their imam training. Notwithstanding, the government does try to influence the Muslim communities in the Netherlands via the imam policy. A paradox in the discussion about the involvement of the government with the training of imams is the fact that in the present situation a number of imams are under the control of a foreign government, namely Turkish. If the Dutch government interferes in that situation, for instance by severely limiting entrance of these imams, it is to be questioned whether, by doing so it is supporting the autonomy of local Muslim organizations or limiting it.

Those critical of imam training in the Netherlands are also opposed to the negative and over-generalized view of the present generation of imams. They point to the training that current imams have had for years on end, which begins at early age. They doubt if the same level of religious knowledge can be obtained by means of training conform to the Dutch educational system. They are annoyed by the pejorative attitudes towards the intellectual traditions of *madrassahs* (religious schools) in the Muslim world.

A final question about the proposed imam training concerns its feasibility. If it is assumed – as it is by the Dutch government – that Muslim organizations themselves will have to bear the responsibility, is there enough organizational strength among these internally-divided organizations? And, is there sufficient (paid) employment for students who would finish the training?

Recent Developments

In the policy document mentioned above, concrete measures are announced for 'import' imams: In the future they will have to follow a foundational course during which they have to learn the Dutch language and acquire relevant knowledge about Dutch society necessary for their job. The government is awaiting initiatives from Muslim organizations and universities concerning a new imam training in higher education and limits itself to indicating the legal possibilities and conditions for applications in this field. It does not give any financial commitment. Without embarking on juridical details, it can be stated that the legal barriers for the founding and funding of new institutions for higher education would be difficult. It would be a different matter if an already-existing university would develop Islamic theological training: in that case conditions can be met relatively easily. From the policy document, it can be gathered that the Dutch government would like to see the imam training it desires realized in this way.

At present, the initiatives of Muslim organizations are headed in a different direction. On the one hand, there are organizations such as Suleymanlis, which transplant training structures they have in their country of origin in the Netherlands, without demonstrating any need for recognition or funding by the Dutch government. On the other hand, there are two organizations that do aspire to public recognition and funding, but in doing so, opt for having their own university: the *Islamitische Universiteit Rotterdam* (Islamic University Rotterdam) which began in 1998 with a very limited budget; and the *Stichting voor Islamitisch Hoger Onderwijs* (Foundation for Islamic Higher Education) in Utrecht, which has developed plans for a (an autonomous) Theological University, in cooperation with Utrecht University. The government seems to be getting what it had asked for all these years, namely Islamic theological training at an academic level, but in a form it does not prefer: independent institutions. ♦

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Note

– The integration policy concerning ethnic minorities in relation to their spiritual ministers. Report of the Minister of Internal Affairs and State Secretary Netelenbos of Education, Culture and Sciences, Netelenbos, The Hague, 1998.