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## **Imams in the Netherlands: Expectations and Realities**

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# Imams in the Netherlands

## Expectations & Realities

WELMOET BOENDER

In numerous public discussions about the development of a “Dutch Islam,” the question emerges of whether an imam can be instrumental in Dutch integration policies by acting as a renewer of the Islamic tradition in a Western liberal secular context. Certainly the Dutch government expects that, within the local migrant mosques, the imams establish a connection between Dutch society and Islam and publicly show loyalty to civic values perceived to be at the core of Dutch identity. In contrast to this optimistic image of an “ideal imam,” a worrisome picture is concomitantly drawn of the “existing imam” who is either conservative and isolated, or radical and segregated, and therefore not prepared for the task of integration. When imams appear in the media who seem incapable of fulfilling the government’s expectations the moral commotion is intense.

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Dutch integration policies? From qualitative descriptive-exploratory research in two mosques and an Islamic student association,<sup>1</sup> carried out between 2000 and 2004, it appears that the imam can indeed play an authoritative role in influencing the moral views and societal options of the believers through moral admonition (for example in his sermons), religious education, and social advice. But it is also important to note that the imam appears as neither the “villain,” nor the “integration wizard” he is stereotypically presented as in government documents and media coverage.

### Imams

The imams of my research base their message on the Quran, Sunna, and fiqh, and encourage believers to participate in society, to demonstrate a strong work ethic, to encourage one’s children to receive education at the highest level possible, and not to be too materialistic. They also preach sexual morality and stress the importance of mar-

**Imams serving in the Netherlands are confronted with diverse expectations. While practising Muslims first of all turn to imams for advice in religious matters, the government expects imams to show believers how to be a good Dutch citizen. But although many Muslims hold their imams in great esteem, the influence of the imam should not be overestimated. Young people in particular are looking in other directions for religious guidance.**

riage.<sup>2</sup> These expressions about private lifestyle and social participation do not seem to oppose civic participation.

Imams thus do speak out about civic society, but they consider the maintenance and reinforcement of the *religious* ties between believers (within their individual and community life styles) as their primary mission. Indeed, imams realise their own limitations beyond this: “as imam, we can indicate

the right position a believer can take and show some alternative options, but it’s up to the people themselves to make their choice” (Turkish imam). Moreover, the possibilities of an imam to publicly conjure up reforming interpretations of orthodox dogmas seem limited. In interviews, several imams emphasized that the role of the imam is primarily an exponent of the religious tradition which they present as more or less fixed. “We focus on the religious aspects and have to follow Islamic law,” the imams repeatedly explained.

An important reason for the limited powers of the imam within the Dutch context is that, in the lay tradition of Sunni Islam, matters eventually depend on the believer him or herself as to whether or not the advice of the imam dictates his or her opinions and actions: “The imam passes on his knowledge about the religious message of the Quran and Sunnah and leads the prayer. That’s it. That’s his job. The decision that you eventually take, is made by yourself. You should fear Allah. All the others are humans, who make mistakes” (male student). Unlike circulating role-expectations in public debate, in Islamic tradition, the imam is not in the same position as—for instance—a Catholic priest, who is supposed to mediate between God and men.

### Believers

Particularly for first generation immigrant Muslims, the maintenance of their ties with their original home-land culture and religion of earlier days is important. Community formation around familiar structures and institutions, such as the mosque, has been relevant to them. Within such structures and institutions, the authority of the imam, temporarily, is reinforced. Hence, the expectations of an imam, by first generation male mosque-goers have always been strong: the imam should not only lead prayers, but also support and advise his congregation in social matters.

In the eyes of second and third generation mosque-goers, as well, it is the duty of the imam to pass on a normative message through which the differences between good and evil practices, according to the sources of Islam, become apparent. Accordingly believers expect him to guide and educate them in ritual practice. They have many “technical questions” regarding those things which are *halal* (legally permitted) and those which are *haram* (forbidden). Yet, increasingly, and in contrast to the first generation, young Muslims demand that the imam explains, on the one hand, the rationality behind the ritual rules and regulations and, on the other hand, inspires them to experience the spiritual meaning of the moral codes of conduct.

Thus, for second and third generation young Muslims, the imam must not only be authoritative in his traditional institutional position as leader of the congregation in prayer and preaching. Rather, he must also be convincing in his message and comprehensibly sketch the connection between Islamic prescriptions and the context of modern

Dutch society. As one of the respondents, a twenty-year old student explained: "For example, jihad has many meanings. Holy war really is the final meaning in a row: when you have only your body left to fight with and no money, no pen to write petitions, or press releases. Our imam teaches us that it is also jihad to study. It offers you the same forgiveness. He teaches us that you can win with your pen." An imam should possess a certain personal charisma and show empathy regarding the daily situations in which the young and pious find themselves. In practice, each imam does this differently. Moreover, according to the students interviewed, existing imams are not always able to answer their personal requests. "Some special imams have real authority, but many ordinary imams do not" (male student).

Also among young Muslims the imam continues to be respected as a core institution of Islam. But he is not consulted as the community's sole authority and may not even represent the first stage of inquiry. Young Dutch Muslims do not accept his advice indiscriminately, nor do they deem this advice obligatory to follow. Thus, the scope and force of the preachings of an average Moroccan or Turkish imam in the Netherlands should not be overestimated.

Furthermore, diverging levels of Dutch language proficiency often make communication between imam and believer difficult. Likewise, the imam does not always show empathy and sympathy with the daily circumstances of the young. Put these factors together and one soon

Possibilities to consult other religious authorities—who operate on local, national, and transnational levels—have become increasingly accessible. In an eclectic manner, young pious believers are influenced by "television shaykhs" like the Egyptian 'Amr Khaled, and "cyber-imams" in discussion forums on the Internet, by various authors of (translated) books, by female leaders in the mosques, and by their peers and relatives. Whereas first generation Muslims appointed the imam to transmit religious norms and values to their children, these children (who now have children of their own) have grown up to be less satisfied with the local mosque imam as their (sole) teacher. Influenced by modern communication techniques, through which transnational networks operate, they have been introduced to a different religious discourse than that proclaimed within the established migrant mosque in the Netherlands.

Another reason for the imam's decreased role and authority is related to the above observations. Young practising Muslims may associate imams in mosques that are directed by first generation men with a "cultural Islam," which they criticize for reflecting an archaic homeland culture. This has been strengthened by the emergence of groups of new religious leaders—often Salafi—who work outside the established, ethnically based mosque. Such groups have developed a religious discourse which sets them (and their followers) apart from that of many local imams.

## New institutions

Among Muslims in the Netherlands a continuous process of interpretation of religious sources and traditions takes place, influenced by the Dutch context as well as by various transnational movements. Practising Muslims in the European diaspora are searching for religious authorities who can help and guide them in processes of interpreting the religious tradition. The imam can be one of them. But in trying to understand, influence or modify these currents, as the Dutch government and broader society has sought to do, it is unwise to focus too heavily on the imams in the local mosques.

As elsewhere in Europe, Islamic religious leadership in the Netherlands occurs through a variety of roles and religio-social positions. New institutions like Islamic universities, where men and women study together, have

**Two boys study in a Rotterdam mosque during Ramadan.**



PHOTO BY ROBIN UTRECHT / © ANP, 2006

understands why Dutch imams are not always successful with young believers. One student explains: "I think an imam should know what happens within Dutch society. So he must know Dutch. But he doesn't. That's why I am open to his advice on religious matters, but I do not feel strongly about his advice on civic matters." Although young highly educated practising Muslims often state that the imam can be consulted on various questions about life in the Netherlands, only a small proportion of the interviewees in this category visit the imam with personal questions.

## Competing religious authorities

If this is the case, then why would an imam training in the Netherlands, as suggested by the Dutch government in the past two decades, not be the obvious solution? Although, because of his institutional position as leader of the congregation and his knowledge of Islamic sources, the imam maintains a certain level of authority, this does not necessarily mean that his audience adhere indiscriminately to his moral admonition. His young educated audience, in particular, check his views and compare these with the ideas of their peers, relatives, Internet preachers, and Dutch speaking lecturers. Besides these sources, female religious teachers should not be overlooked. Though often not visible within the realm of public debate, their influence is considerable. Women generally prefer to put their questions directly to female religious leaders, while eschewing direct contact with imams. Communication thus occurs through written notes with questions, mediation of male relatives, or listening to the Friday sermon.

been established. Certain previously unheard of professions, such as Islamic pastoral caretaking in prisons and hospitals, now exist. Muslim male and female writers, publicists, and other intellectuals have cautiously entered into public debates with their interpretations of religious sources. Those evolutions and its accompanying new discourses are indeed relevant in the development of Islam in the Netherlands or Dutch Islam. At present still "avant-garde," they will become increasingly visible in future interpretations of the religious texts. Imams will remain important. But in their integration policies, the Dutch government should not place all its eggs in one basket.

## Notes

1. Based on anthropological observation, forty-eight interviews, and analysis of eleven Friday sermons in a Turkish and a Moroccan mosque community and a Muslim Student Association.
2. See the dissertation of Boender for translated sermons and teachings of a number of imams working in the Netherlands.

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