

Questions of tolerance and intolerance

Holland's Jews watch hesitantly as the country goes to the polls amid rising nationalism and an anti-Muslim backlash
By Tibor Krausz, *Amsterdam*

WOLFGANG RATTAY / REUTERS



Riding a wave of anti-Muslim populist sentiment, Geert Wilders has promised to ban the Koran and close down the Netherlands' mosques should he become prime minister

IN THEIR hometown of Amsterdam, Baruch Spinoza and Anne Frank have long been upheld as the famously liberal city's twin beacons of moral guidance.

The rationalist philosopher, whose bronze statue in front of City Hall is a popular tourist attraction, has been celebrated for his vocal advocacy of religious tolerance. The vivacious teenage diarist, whose wartime hiding place in a cramped little attic now serves as part of the Anne Frank House in central Amsterdam, has, in turn, come to personify, as a high-profile victim of it, the enduring evil of intolerance.

As locals cast their ballots in general elections on March 15, questions of tolerance and intolerance are again on many people's minds across the Netherlands. The anti-immigrant Freedom Party is riding high in the polls thanks to the unabashedly populist stance of its maverick leader, Geert Wilders.

You can encounter manifestations of muscular Islamism even during leisurely strolls around town in Amsterdam

A vociferous critic of Islam, Wilders, 53, has likened the Koran to Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and insisted that Islamist ideology is more dangerous than Nazism. He has vowed to ban the Koran and close down all the mosques in the Netherlands if he's elected prime minister – although he hasn't explained how he would go about doing all that. Wilders has also pledged to follow the example of the United Kingdom and take the Netherlands out of the European Union so that the country could better defend its borders against illegal entrants.

With his impish features and bouffant hairdo dyed platinum blond, Wilders resembles less a firebrand than an eccentric science teacher. Yet, circumspect he isn't. The politician recently dismissed young Moroccan immigrants with criminal tendencies as "scum."

"Not all [Moroccans] are scum," he elucidated in an off-the-cuff interview with a television reporter in February. "But there is a lot of Moroccan scum in Holland who make the streets unsafe, mostly young people. And that should change."

That change should start with putting an end to all immigration from Muslim countries, Wilders has insisted repeatedly over the years. He implored Dutch voters to "please make the Netherlands ours again" by voting his party into office so he could make good on that policy pledge. "We should be tolerant to people who are tolerant to us," he explained. "We should be intolerant to people who are intolerant to us."

One wonders what Baruch and Anne, one the son of Portuguese Jewish refugees, the other a German-born immigrant to Amsterdam, would make of the blustering Dutch nationalist, who is himself partly of Indonesian immigrant heritage. Perhaps they would see Wilders, like his legions of critics at home and abroad, as a jumped-up fascist, a "far-right extremist," a "vulgar rabble-rouser," and an out-and-out "Islamophobe."

Or, perhaps, they could see why his anti-immigrant message has come to resonate with a large segment of Dutch society, which seems to have reached the end of its much-vaunted tolerance when it comes to some questionable forms of "cultural enrichment" that mass immigration has brought to the Netherlands.

THE DUTCH Jewish writer Leon de Winter has called Wilders "a necessity in today's political landscape" because the politician dares to challenge the prevailing political narrative that deems it a moral obligation by European nations to facilitate the mass immigration of Muslim migrants while simultaneously portraying their growing presence as an unquestionable benefit to their host nations. "These feelings of discomfort, of desperation, about very lax migration that are felt [among] the general public here in Holland [are], I think, a bit more intense among the Dutch Jews," de Winter explains.

You can encounter manifestations of muscular Islamism even during leisurely strolls around town in Amsterdam. On a recent

wintry afternoon, hundreds of Turkish residents gathered at the city's historic Dam Square, right in front of the Royal Palace. The women wearing *hijabs* and *chadors*, the men bearing Turkish flags and pictures of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, they had come to listen animatedly to fiery speeches in support of the Turkish strongman, an avowed Islamist who has done much to roll back secularism in Turkey.

Their indignant tirades amplified by loudspeakers, bearded men, presumably from Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party, berated Western nations for supporting Kurdish independence and sang the praises of Turkish nationalism. Dutch street performers in their Yoda and Crypt-Keeper costumes, who are among the usual inhabitants of the square, appeared forlorn and out of place beside the heaving crowd of agitated Turkish immigrants.

It's hard to imagine that stalwarts of Wilders' Freedom Party would ever dream of staging a Dutch nationalist rally in downtown Istanbul – or that they would be allowed to get away with it.

But such is European-style multiculturalism: a largely monocultural phenomenon whereby tolerance is routinely a one-way street.

We once colonized people, and now we're getting colonized in return

Bring up the subject of Muslim mass immigration, and locals you encounter in Amsterdam over a beer or coffee (or cannabis joint, if you so choose) will instantly shy away from anything beyond paying lip service to the virtues of "diversity." Once they feel at ease, though, they may well become more forthcoming, bemoaning what they see as an increasingly fissiparous society.

"We once colonized people, and now we're getting colonized in return," quipped a middle-aged IT professional over brunch in a tea house near the city center. "We only have ourselves to blame!"

But some of the cultural fault lines between natives and immigrants from predominantly Muslim nations are no laughing matter, for they have been drawn in blood.

EAST OF Dam Square, in the bicycle lane of a nondescript street named after the 18th-century Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus, a few wilting flowers placed on the pavement mark the spot where the film director Theo van Gogh, the great-grandnephew of the post-impressionist painter Vincent, was murdered in cold blood on the morning of November 2, 2004. Van Gogh was bicycling to work, in the style of many an Amsterdammer, when he was ambushed and shot repeatedly by Mohammed Bouyeri, a second-generation Dutch Muslim of Moroccan descent, who proceeded to slash the dying man's throat before pinning a note to his chest with a knife.

The note was addressed to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali Muslim immigrant who, as a member of the Dutch parliament, had been an outspoken critic of regressive Islamic practices. She and van Gogh had just produced a short film, "Submission," which sought to highlight the abuse of women in Islamic cultures and what the two saw as scripturally sanctified misogyny in Islam. In doing so, they instantly earned the murderous enmity of homegrown Islamists such as Bouyeri.

Bouyeri's open letter to Hirsi Ali was a rambling screed of Islamist grievance-mongering in which he accused her of being in the service of Islam's alleged arch enemies, the Jews, "who are a product of Talmudic schools" and dominated Dutch politics, as evidenced by Amsterdam's then mayor, Job Cohen, who was himself Jewish.

"How do you feel about the fact that a mayor is leading Amsterdam who subscribes to a religion that allows Jews to lie to non-Jews?" Bouyeri wanted to know. "How do you feel about the fact that you are part of a government that supports a state [Israel] with an ideology that advocates genocide [against Palestinians]?"

Although both van Gogh and Bouyeri were Dutch citizens, they had wholly different views of what that meant. For the irreverent film director, steeped in Amsterdam's centuries-old liberal traditions with



Muslims shout slogans in Amsterdam during a demonstration in solidarity with the people rising up across the Arab and Muslim world, in 2011

its patron saints of enlightened rationalism like Spinoza, being Dutch meant being free to criticize all religions – and poke fun at them if he so wished.

Before his murder, van Gogh, a portly and aging enfant terrible of sorts with a sullen stare and a cigarette habitually protruding insouciantly from between his lips, waved aside offers of police protection, insisting he had nothing to fear because "no one kills the village idiot." (His suicidal nonchalance was all the more surprising, given that two years prior a friend of his, the openly gay politician Pim Fortuyn, had been murdered in broad daylight by a left-wing activist for his frequent criticisms of Islam.)

For Bouyeri, on the other hand, being Dutch was an accident of birth. He saw



MICHAEL KOOREN / REUTERS

himself primarily as a Muslim who belonged to the global community of true believers, the *Ummah*, and whose religion claimed rightful sovereignty over all nations with the laws of divinely inspired *shari'a* trumping the petty man-made laws of the Netherlands.

For Islamists everywhere, mocking or criticizing Islamic beliefs is *haram*. It's a crime that warrants the death penalty, and Bouyeri decided to act on that Islamic precept by murdering van Gogh.

Over a decade on, a sense of unease, fear even, remains palpable in Amsterdam. As across much of Western Europe, from Malmö to Marseille and from Berlin to Brussels, mass immigration from Muslim-majority countries has facilitated the spread into Amsterdam and other Dutch cities of some deep-seated cultural pathologies from the Middle East: a spike in virulent anti-Semitism, a lingering threat of terrorism, a diehard form of religious obscurantism that brooks no criticism or dissent.

Security at several synagogues and Jewish community centers around Amsterdam has been beefed up with a visible and permanent police presence. De Winter, an outspoken critic of homegrown Islamism, has compared Jewish schools in Amsterdam to heavily fortified "bunkers." It's "a scandal [and] total insanity that this is happening, that Jewish kids have to be protected like this in our age," he elucidates.

Willem Wagenaar, a researcher at the Anne Frank House, cautions against undue panic, however. "Anti-Semitism is a big problem everywhere [in Europe], but if you compare the situation in Amsterdam to that in Paris or Brussels, it's less visible," Wagenaar says. That said, he adds, "Extreme jihadists know no borders and the threat of being targeted by them is there."

Last November, Dutch media reported that the country's intelligence service had uncovered a terrorist plot by a local Islamist cell to target a synagogue and kill a large number of Jews. Its alleged mastermind, a

The Anne Frank House – one of Amsterdam's most popular tourist destinations – now requires heavily armed police to stand guard against terrorist threats

Dutch Moroccan man who was linked to Amsterdam's Arrayan Mosque, belonged to the Hofstad Network, the same homegrown Islamist terrorist network that had counted Bouyeri among its members. Aziz Oilkadis, chairman of the board at the Sunni mosque, tried to downplay reports that his house of worship was a hotbed of jihadism. "Do I know jihadists? We know so many people," Oilkadis told a Dutch newspaper. "That means nothing."

TO LOCAL Jews, that does mean something. They have been feeling increasingly under threat for years. In 2014, the country's ultra-Orthodox chief rabbi, Binyamin Jacobs, reported that two

“Mediterranean-looking” youths (read: Muslim immigrants) tried to run him down at an Amsterdam gas station in what appeared to be a copycat version of the car ramming attacks carried out by Palestinians against random Israeli passersby.

That same year, in response to Israel’s military operation to stop an incessant barrage of rocket attacks from Gaza, local Muslims held anti-Israel mass rallies in The Hague and other Dutch cities with participants chanting “Death to Jews!” and “Death to Israel!” in Arabic.

“There’s a clear correlation between events in Israel and the flare-up of anti-Semitism in Amsterdam,” Wagenaar observes. “Being an ‘anti-Zionist’ among young people from a migrant background, Turkish or Moroccan, seems to be a popular identity marker.”

In other words, to fit in with your peers in immigrant communities, you just have to hate the “Zionists.”

Much of it, though, is relatively harmless grandstanding, akin to the casual anti-Semitic slurs dished out by supporters of rival teams at the non-Jewish fans and players of Amsterdam’s famous soccer club, AFC Ajax, in a long-running case of sporting rivalry. Although Ajax has never been a Jewish club, its supporters, calling themselves “super Jews,” have adopted the Star of David and Israel’s flag as their improvised emblems, thereby inviting routine anti-Semitic abuse from rival soccer fans.

SOME JEWISH commentators, though, have faulted not the Arab-Israeli conflict or youthful peer pressure but rather the pervasive culture of political correctness in the Netherlands that has replaced good old-fashioned classical liberalism.

The former ascribes a permanent status of victimhood to select groups seen as “disadvantaged” and “marginalized,” such as Muslim immigrants, and effectively absolves them, individually and collectively, of responsibility for any of their unwholesome ideas or deeds – in the manner of the disingenuous “Islamic terrorism has nothing to do with Islam or Muslims” excuse. The latter emphasizes the importance of rationalism, secularism and individual responsibility in the vein of Spinoza’s philos-

ophy. By its lights, tolerance should not decay into selective permissiveness whereby certain groups are reflexively held to lower standards of conduct than the rest of society.

“Because of the large influence of the Left and extreme Left in the Netherlands, the problem [of Islamist terrorism] is not taken seriously enough,” Awi Cohen, a board member of the Dutch chapter of Israel’s Likud Party, recently told an online Jewish newspaper. “They don’t want to acknowledge the problems that come from immigration and ‘multiculturalism,’ and call issues raised about safety ‘Islamophobia.’”

Wilders would certainly agree with that. Last December, the controversial politician, who has been under constant police protection for over a decade to save him from would-be assassins, was convicted of “inciting discrimination” for prompting his supporters, at a 2014 rally in The Hague, to chant that they wanted “fewer” Moroccan immigrants.

THE NETHERLANDS is a small country of 17 million, and a fifth of citizens are already of a foreign background. Of immigrants, some 400,000 are of Turkish and another 400,000 are of Moroccan origins.

According to a government-commissioned report, in some predominantly Moroccan neighborhoods in Dutch cities, youth crime rates have reached 50 percent. Forty percent of Moroccan male youths, between the ages of 12 and 24, have committed a crime documented by police. More than 60 percent of Dutch-born Moroccans between the ages of 17 and 23 drop out of school without basic qualifications, while a similar percentage among older Moroccan male immigrants live on welfare.

Hundreds of Dutch Muslims, meanwhile, have joined the ranks of fighters for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Some of them even raised the black flag of the movement on the streets of a predominantly Muslim district in The Hague in open defiance of local authorities.

To be sure, many Turkish and Moroccan immigrants are fine and upstanding citizens who have contributed much to their adopted new home. You see them everywhere in Amsterdam: they drive taxis; they work in restaurants, kebab shops and convenience

stores; they run small businesses; they headline artistic shows.

Some also stand up for the country’s liberal values. In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris in January 2015, the Moroccan-born mayor of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb, bluntly told his coreligionists: “If you can’t accept humorists who create a newspaper, then may I tell you to [expletive] off.” Aboutaleb, the son of an imam, elucidated: “If you don’t like freedom here, for heaven’s sake pack your bags and leave.”

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Instead, large numbers of immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East continue packing their bags back home and coming to the Netherlands. In the first half of last year, nearly 100,000 new arrivals entered the country, mostly as part of the continent-wide migrant crisis. Amsterdam saw over 15,000 new residents added last year to its current population of 850,000.

They’ve been seeking asylum and the prospects of a new life. Many, however, have also brought with them atavistic beliefs and cultural practices that place them at odds with the mores of Dutch society at large. These beliefs include a reflexive Jew hatred, as the sociologist Mark Elchardus has documented within Moroccan immigrant communities, albeit the subject remains largely taboo in polite society.

In December, the Muslim founders of the Dutch Free Democracy Party, which will be competing in the March 15 parliamentary elections, caused an uproar by posting a series of anti-Semitic slanders on their official Facebook page. They insisted that “Jews are worse than the devil”; suggested that Adolf Hitler was a Jew; and accused Wilders of



ROMY ARROYO FERNANDEZ / NURPHOTO

being a “pawn” in the hands of wily Jews who use him to “stir up trouble in Holland.” Wilders hasn’t endeared himself to local Muslims by being a staunch supporter of Israel who spent time on a kibbutz in his youth and has called the Jewish state “a beacon of light in a sea of Islamic darkness.”

Even Dutch Muslims promoted as paragons of peaceful coexistence in the country’s media may turn out to be rabid Jew haters on closer inspection.

In mid-February, Rachid el-Hajoui, a Moroccan immigrant who works at a pizza parlor in the town of Tilburg, went on prime-time television to speak out against what he said was growing anti-Muslim animus in Dutch society. He called for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. “I want my family and everyone to live in harmony,” he stressed.

WITHIN HOURS, however, it transpired that el-Hajoui, a former activist for the Dutch Socialist Party, had been singing a different tune on his Twitter account. In one post, he had opined that “Hitler was nothing compared to the Israelis. Someone would [have] had to finish his work 60 [years] ago.” In another, he had called for the mass murder of Israeli Jews: “Only answer to Israel is total extermination, annihilate the cockroaches.”

So much for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

Such bloodcurdling calls for the “extermination” of Jewish “cockroaches” would have been familiar to Anne Frank.

In the “Secret Annex” of a canal house where she hid with her family until they were discovered in August 1944 and deported to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen,

The threats facing Dutch Jews have not prevented some from celebrating holidays in public spaces, such as this 2016 Hanukkah gathering in Amsterdam

a long line of visitors files past exhibits – pages from Anne’s diary, sepia photos of the Franks – in almost reverential silence.

Out on the picturesque streets with their myriad canals and flamboyantly gabled 17th century houses from the city’s “golden age,” when Spinoza called Amsterdam home, life bustles. Nazi goons no longer prowl in search of Jews, yet murderous hatred is in the air again. From around a corner at the Anne Frank House, burly, heavily armed policemen heave into view. They’re here to guard the museum against possible terrorist attacks.

A sign of the times in Amsterdam. ■