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
IN THEIR hometown of Amsterdam, Bæruch 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.

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.

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wintry afternoon, hundreds of Turkish res-
dents 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 speech-
es in support of the Turkish strongman, an
avowed Islamist who has done much to roll
back secularism in Turkey.

Their indignant tirades amplified by loud-
speakers, bearded men, presumably from
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tinent leaders with a fierce new stance on
nationalism. It was a clear rebuke to the
European Union, which has not hesitated to
point the finger of blame at Turkey over
issues like irregular migration and the
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speakers, bearded men, presumably from
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ty, berated Western nations for supporting
Kurdish independence and sang the praises
of Turkish nationalism. Dutch street per-
formers in their Yoda and Crypt-Keeper
costumes, who are among the usual inhab-
tants of the square, appeared forlorn and out
of place beside the heaving crowd of agitat-
ed Turkish immigrants.

It’s hard to imagine that stalwarts of
Wilders’ Freedom Party would ever dream
of staging a Dutch nationalist rally in down-
town Istanbul – or that they would be al-
good to get away with it.

But such is European-style multicultur-
alism: 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 can-

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
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
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 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 dashed 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 unwelcome 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 philosophy. 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...
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, 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.