

## A Preliminary Assessment of Counter-Radicalization in the Netherlands

By Lorenzo Vidino

DURING THE LAST few years, several Western countries, realizing that segments of their Muslim populations embraced extremist views and joined more or less organized Salafi-jihadi networks, have developed programs to fight radicalization. Among the most sophisticated counter-radicalization plans is that devised by the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> Dutch authorities were among the first in Europe to be faced with the threat of homegrown terrorism, as radicalized clusters of mostly Dutch-born young Muslims belonging to the so-called Hofstad network spread their radical ideology and planned attacks as early as 2002.<sup>2</sup> Today, after the peak of tension that took place with the assassination of Theo van Gogh in 2004, Dutch authorities believe that the most violent forms of radical Islam receive only limited support among Dutch Muslims and that individuals who want to carry out terrorist attacks in the Netherlands are only an isolated minority.

Nevertheless, Dutch officials have monitored the growth of a different streak of radical Islam in the country, which they refer to as “political Salafism” or “radical *da'wa*.”<sup>3</sup> While not using violent means to achieve their goals, political Salafists are actively working for the establishment of small Muslim societies within mainstream Dutch society. Rejecting most Western values and any idea of integration, political Salafists are using sophisticated methods to turn Muslims “away, physically as well as mentally, from their surrounding societies.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Dutch authorities see radicalization not just as a threat to

security, but also to the democratic legal order, as it can lead to social unrest and increasing polarization.<sup>5</sup> Mindful of this scenario, Dutch authorities have devised a comprehensive plan to target radicalization in all its aspects.

### Countering Radicalization

Designed primarily for Islamic fundamentalism (but applied also in part to right-wing militancy), the plan was conceived by the Dutch government in 2004 and has evolved significantly since then. Two key characteristics of the plan are its local focus and the high number of parts involved.<sup>6</sup> As for the former, the Dutch government believes that local authorities are in a better position to detect problems and implement solutions. While central authorities provide general guidelines, training, and part of the funding, local authorities have virtually complete independence on how to act. As a consequence, each large Dutch city has created its own program with unique characteristics, even though most are shaped after Amsterdam’s program (called *Wij Amsterdammers*). As for the latter, all aspects of the plan, from its conception to its practical implementation, are characterized by the cooperation of an intricate web of ministries, governmental agencies, local authorities, social services, educational facilities, think-tanks, religious institutions and freelance consultants. Openness, information sharing and constant inputs from all possible sources seem to be the guiding principles.

A key characteristic of all the programs is their flexibility, as authorities possess a remarkable range of measures and approaches to apply according to their targets and goals. Repressive measures are, of course, available when authorities have to deal with “doers,” individuals who are on the brink of using violence. Yet, if an individual is deemed to be radicalized yet still “savable,” authorities might use the curative approach, applying targeted deradicalization measures that should ideally bind him or her to society.

“Searchers,” individuals faced by an identity crisis and who are still looking for their place in society, are targeted with a series of different measures designed to lead them to find answers to their questions in democratic values rather than in Salafism. Finally, authorities have created a whole range of activities targeting more generally the sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream society felt by many young Muslims, the so-called “breeding ground.” According to Dutch authorities, such breeding grounds can be generated by several factors, but mostly by a perception of injustice and discrimination that can lead disenchanted young Muslims to break contact with mainstream society and find an alternative in Salafism. In order to address the breeding ground, all programs provide for large numbers of preventive measures that emphasize mutual tolerance and acceptance and should increase young Muslims’ resilience to radical messages.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the programs seem to focus on the concept of empowering the individual and making him or her feel part of society. Authorities have organized countless meetings, conferences, training sessions, art projects and neighborhood festivals focusing on these principles. Several initiatives are also designed to combat the negative image of Islam among the Dutch population, a fact that is considered a barrier to integration. Therefore, many cities have organized events to bring together ethnic Dutch and Muslims, such as interfaith dialogues, and culinary and neighborhood festivals; the city of Amsterdam even organized a Ramadan festival designed to attract all Amsterdammers (the event had the subtitle “Will you have dinner in my home?”). Some programs are designed for women, the emancipation of whom is considered a key step in the advancement of social cohesion, while others target specific age groups. Some are designed to provide public officials and social workers with skills to recognize, prevent, and fight radicalization.

While Dutch authorities clearly state that radicalization is not simply the by-product of poor economic conditions, they also acknowledge that improving life conditions and work opportunities

1 Most of the information used for this article comes from interviews conducted by the author in May and June 2008 with Dutch government officials and experts. Among the latter, the author wishes to thank Edwin Bakker, Froukje Demant, Fiore Geelhoed, Amy-Jane Gielen and Colin Mellis.

2 Lorenzo Vidino, “The Hofstad Group: The New Face of Terrorist Networks in Europe,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:7 (2007): pp. 579-590.

3 “The Radical Dawa in Transition,” General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), 2007.

4 Ibid.

5 “Amsterdam Against Radicalisation,” Municipality of Amsterdam, November 15, 2007.

6 “Counterterrorism at Local Level: A Guide,” Netherlands National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, October 2007.

7 Ibid.

among some of the country's most economically deprived communities can increase social cohesion.<sup>8</sup> Several programs provide professional skills and are designed to facilitate the entrance of minority youths in the job market, while the Ministry of Housing's efforts to improve living conditions in some disadvantaged neighborhoods are closely coordinated with counter-radicalization programs.

### The Relationship with Islamists

The focus on self-empowerment makes Dutch programs resemble some of the gang prevention programs implemented in the United States rather than some of the counter-radicalization programs recently introduced in Saudi Arabia or Indonesia, which focus heavily on re-interpreting Islamic texts.<sup>9</sup> Various reasons explain why Dutch authorities have decided to limit their focus on religion. One is the presence of constitutional norms on separation of church and state that make it difficult for Dutch authorities to intervene in religious affairs. Another is the consideration that a religious-based approach might be more useful in deradicalization efforts rather than in radicalization prevention. While countries that have engaged in such religious-based approaches have scores of committed jihadists, the Dutch believe to have only a few dozen hardened radicals and therefore focus more on a preventive approach based on self-empowerment and the creation of a positive view of Dutch society.

Finally, practical considerations on the challenges posed by selecting partners among the Muslim community have also prevented the Dutch from establishing more religious-based programs. Various programs have reached out to key figures in the community, from businessmen to soccer players, attempting to use them as models or mentors. More problematic is the choice of partners among religious figures. While it is clear that the participation of religious organizations is crucial for the programs' success, authorities are aware that there is not one Muslim

community with a unified leadership, and, therefore, the decision of whom to engage is a difficult one. Moreover, while most of the Muslim organizations and individuals that participate in the programs and receive public funding are moderate and apolitical, some of those who have offered to help embrace a form of Islamism.

Dutch authorities are faced with the same dilemma haunting most of their Western counterparts: can non-violent Islamists be engaged and used as partners against violent radicalization?<sup>10</sup> Can Western offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood or political Salafists such as those active in the Netherlands become partners against the appeal of jihadists? The Dutch seem

**“Such breeding grounds can be generated by several factors, but mostly by a perception of injustice and discrimination that can lead disenchanted young Muslims to break contact with mainstream society and find an alternative in Salafism.”**

---

to address these questions by drawing a clear line between engaging and empowering. Various voices, as long as they do not advocate violence, should be engaged, since pushing non-violent Islamists at the margins could have negative repercussions. Nevertheless, authorities feel that they cannot consider them as permanent partners, as there is a clear understanding that these forces espouse a message that clashes with the Dutch government's ideas of democracy, integration and cohesive society.

This assessment leads to a case-by-case approach in which authorities engage non-violent Islamists when they need to and when common ground can be found. This policy was implemented, for example, during the months preceding the release of the controversial movie

*Fitna* by Dutch MP Geert Wilders. Security services held several meetings with some of the most radical Salafist imams in the country, explaining that the Dutch government did not support Wilders and obtaining from the imams a promise, later kept, that they would urge their followers not to react to the movie violently. Nevertheless, the security services do not consider political Salafists as reliable partners and advise local authorities against doing so. The security services' advice is particularly important since political Salafists have been regularly approaching municipalities and provinces with offers of partnership in counter-radicalization and integration programs.

Dutch authorities and political Salafists seem to be playing a complicated game, with the latter displaying moderation to participate in the system and the former partially opening to them while being wary of their real aims. The Dutch seem to handle this situation quite well when dealing with Salafists, but their task becomes more challenging when they have to assess the aims of other more ambiguous figures.

One such figure is Mohammed Cheppih, a Moroccan Dutch who is well known to authorities for his dubious connections. Cheppih was the Dutch representative of the Saudi-based Muslim World League and the Belgian-based Arab European League, an organization that Dutch domestic intelligence has described as “polarizing and opposed to integration.”<sup>11</sup> During the last few years, Cheppih has made a dramatic change of his rhetoric, publicly condemning some of his past ties and maintaining a vigorous pro-integration approach, which he claims has been inspired by Tariq Ramadan. Today, Cheppih is actively involved in several government-sponsored counter-radicalization activities and heads the Poldermoskee, a mosque based in Amsterdam's critical Slotervaart district created specifically to address the needs of second generation Dutch Muslims and where Dutch is the only language spoken. It is not clear if Cheppih has had a genuine change of heart, or if his newfound moderation is simply opportunistic. Regardless, authorities have decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

8 “Policies of Integration and Prevention of Radicalisation in the Netherlands: A Progress Report,” Netherlands Ministry of Immigration and Integration, July 2006.

9 Kirsten E. Schulze, “Indonesia's Approach to Jihadist Deradicalization,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:8 (2008).

10 Peter Mandaville, “Engaging Islamists in the West,” *CTC Sentinel* 1:7 (2008).

11 “2002 Annual Report,” General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD), p. 26.

**Assessing the Programs**

Having begun only a couple of years ago, most programs are still in their infancy and it is therefore too early to assess their efficacy. The challenges are unquestionably many. Some programs have experienced difficulties in getting participants to their courses, as radicals target young Muslims from the neighborhood who want to attend. Some schools, which should be key components of the programs, have also been reluctant to participate, often refusing to acknowledge that some of their students embrace radical ideas.

Despite these predictable difficulties, the Dutch seem to have started with the right foot and with admirable determination. Most programs are well-financed (*Wij Amsterdammers* alone could count on an eight million euro budget in 2007), well-designed, and constantly adapting according to the results and the feedback from the field. As most Western countries are only now thinking about establishing counter-radicalization plans (the United Kingdom is the only other Western country that has put together a comparably comprehensive and well-financed plan), the Dutch initiative deserves to be looked at with attention.

*Lorenzo Vidino is a Senior Fellow in International Security Studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His research focuses on Islamist and jihadist networks worldwide, focusing mostly on Europe and North America. He is the author of the book Al-Qaeda in Europe: The New Battleground of International Jihad (Prometheus, 2005) and a frequent contributor to several leading newspapers and academic journals. He is currently working on a new book on Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated networks in the West.*