

THE NETHERLANDS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom of individuals to profess their religion or belief. It is a crime to engage in public speech inciting religious hatred. Local governments provided supplemental security resources to protect Jewish and Muslim institutions. A parliamentary opposition leader continued to speak out against Islam. Government ministers issued statements rejecting anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic sentiments and discussed additional measures and programs to counter them with the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Given the small size of the Jewish community, the number of anti-Semitic incidents was relatively high, according to the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI). Muslims faced discrimination and mosques were confronted with vandalism and threats. A variety of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) conducted programs to counter prejudice against Jews and Muslims.

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy officials, and the visiting U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities emphasized to government officials, in formal meetings and informal conversations, the value of embracing diversity. The U.S. embassy and consulate general pursued public outreach to youth, academics, and women to increase interfaith understanding and tolerance. The Ambassador discussed religious freedom and discrimination against Muslims with Muslim leaders and continued to work with groups combating discrimination, including the Anne Frank House. The Special Representative to Muslim Communities held meetings with community leaders to support religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 16.9 million (July 2015 estimate).

In a 2014 Statistics Netherlands survey, 48 percent of the population declared no church affiliation, 25 percent self-identified as Roman Catholic, 16 percent as Protestant, 5 percent as Muslim, and 6 percent as “other,” including Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist.

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Most Muslims live in urban areas and are of Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese background. The Muslim population includes immigrants and asylum seekers from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Stephen Roth Institute, a research institute at Tel Aviv University, and the Council of Europe estimate the number of Jews at approximately 30,000. A 2008 report of the Scientific Council for Government Policy identified a Hindu population of between 100,000 and 215,000, of whom approximately 85 percent are of Surinamese descent and 10 percent of Indian descent. The Buddhist community has approximately 17,000 members, according to a 2007 report by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, the latest estimate available.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and provides for the freedom of individuals to profess their religion or belief, individually or in community with others, without affecting their responsibilities under the law. The constitution allows the government to restrict the exercise of religious beliefs on specific grounds, such as concern for health hazards, traffic safety, or risk of public disorder.

The law makes it a crime to engage in public speech that incites religious hatred, and provides a penalty of imprisonment up to two years, a fine of up to 8,100 euros (\$8,814), or both. In order to qualify as hate speech, the statements must be directed at a group of people; statements targeted at a philosophy or religion, such as “Islam” as opposed to “Muslims,” are not criminal hate speech.

The law permits employees to refuse to work on Sundays for religious reasons, but employers may deny employees such an exception, depending on the nature of the work, such as employment in the health sector. Members of religious communities for whom the Sabbath is not Sunday may request similar exemptions.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government, but the government recognizes religious groups and grants them tax exemptions, if they meet specific criteria. For example, under the tax law, institutions must be “of a philosophical or religious nature,” contribute to the general welfare of society, and be non-profit and non-violent to qualify for tax exemptions.

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Antidiscrimination boards work independently at the municipal level, under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. These local boards provide information on how to register and report complaints and mediate disputes.

The government provides funding to religious schools, other religious educational institutions, and religious healthcare facilities. To qualify for funding, institutions have to meet government educational standards as well as minimum class size and healthcare requirements.

Government Practices

On October 21, the appellate court in The Hague denied Scientology the status of an institution of public advancement, making it ineligible for tax exemptions, on the grounds that it operated as a commercial enterprise.

Local governments continued to provide all Jewish institutions with security, a practice which they instituted following the shooting death of four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014. Local authorities also provided security to Muslim institutions at their request.

The government continued to require all imams and other spiritual leaders recruited in Islamic countries to complete a year-long integration course before practicing and to permit the Diyanet, Turkey's religious affairs directorate, to appoint imams for most of the approximately 200 Turkish Muslim mosques.

The National Discrimination Expertise Center (LECD) coordinated the prosecution of cases of discrimination and hate speech, including inciting religious hatred. In 2014, the year for which the most recent figures are available, the LECD registered 174 incidents, of which 30 percent concerned anti-Semitism and 6 percent related to discrimination against Muslims. Indictments were issued in 59 percent of all cases, resulting in convictions in 90 percent of the cases. The most common sentences were fines and community service.

The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (NIHR) and municipal antidiscrimination boards addressed individual complaints, such as the denial of internships to female Muslim students because they refused to remove their headscarves. The rulings generally held that any restriction on wearing headscarves should be limited and based on security or other carefully delineated

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grounds pertaining to the nature of the work. In practice, headscarves were permitted almost everywhere, including in schools.

On May 22, the cabinet agreed to a legislative proposal prohibiting clothing that fully covers the face, such as burqas or niqabs, in educational and healthcare institutions, public buildings, and public transportation. According to the government, the proposal sought to balance people's freedom to dress in the way they like with the importance of mutual and recognizable communication. Some Muslims said the change would restrict their religious freedom; the government said it would not. By year's end, parliament had yet to vote on the proposal.

Government ministers repeatedly rejected anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and general discrimination. On July 17, Foreign Minister Bert Koenders stated, "we should never give up the fight against racism and anti-Semitism," and "we should not yield to the terror of intolerance and tackle anti-Jewish aggression hard." On April 25, Prime Minister Mark Rutte said, "we should stay alert and vigilant because anti-Semitism around us is never far away, and that is unacceptable." Following the January attack on Charlie Hebdo's office in France, Rutte addressed a large public event in Amsterdam and defended free speech, stating there should be "room for everybody's belief and conviction." On January 9, Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher said "expressions of Islamophobia are unacceptable" and "vandalism of mosques will not be tolerated."

The leader of the populist Freedom Party (PVV), opposition parliamentarian Geert Wilders, continued to speak out against Islam in public speeches and on social media. Wilders traveled extensively to campaign against the "Islamization of the West," attending events including the launching of an anti-Islam party in Perth, Australia, addressing a Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) demonstration in Dresden, Germany, giving a speech at a breakfast meeting in the U.S. Congress, and presenting the award for the best Muhammad cartoons in Garland, Texas. The government began preparations for the hate speech trial against Wilders for remarks he made about Moroccans at a rally in 2014. The trial was expected to take place in 2016. In September Wilders led the protest against what he called "the tsunami of refugees from Islamic countries who threaten our women and our civilization."

A number of official institutions, including the Council of State and the NIHR, both national-level bodies, were responsible for reviewing complaints of religious discrimination. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was

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difficult to categorize many incidents as solely based on religious identity. The NIHR also provided periodic advice to the government on issues involving religious discrimination.

The government used newspaper advertisements, internet outreach, and public service announcements to encourage victims to report discrimination, including on religious grounds.

Government ministers met with the Jewish community to discuss appropriate measures to counter anti-Semitism. Local authorities engaged with local NGOs as they implemented a Ministry of the Interior national action plan to combat discrimination, particularly anti-Semitism. For example, local governments worked with youth groups and relevant NGOs on projects which included encouraging the Turkish community to discuss anti-Semitism, organizing roundtable events with teachers to discuss anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, holding discussions with social media organizations on countering online anti-Semitism, and promoting interreligious dialogue.

Government ministers met with Muslim community leaders to discuss measures to counter anti-Islamic sentiment, including a campaign to urge Muslims to register discrimination; better registration of incidents; joint efforts to counter anti-Muslim sentiment; and support for community-building initiatives in Muslim communities. They reached agreements with the principal Islamic organizations on improving the reporting of anti-Muslim incidents. Apart from these agreements, local authorities in the larger cities started registering incidents of discrimination against Muslims as specifically due to discrimination against their faith.

Following the increased migration influx, the government debated a law that would require asylum seekers to sign a participation statement of civic integration in order to obtain a residence permit. At year's end the statement remained voluntary. The statement made newcomers aware of their rights and obligations as well as the fundamental values of Dutch society, including freedom of religion.

The government reiterated the importance of Holocaust education, mandating its inclusion in curricula, but allowed schools to design their own approach to the subject, which Jewish community leaders said resulted in insufficient coverage.

The government cancelled its programs to subsidize universities that provided training for individuals to become imams due to lack of interest among prospective

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students. The training had aimed to convey to prospective imams a better understanding of the country.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of threats, verbal abuse, and the desecration of monuments and cemeteries. CIDI, which continued to track anti-Semitic incidents, except for those occurring online, reported a sharp rise in incidents (171) in 2014 (most recently available figures), largely during the July 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict. CIDI registered a sharp increase in physical confrontations with unknown persons, reportedly enhancing a sense of insecurity within the Jewish community. An unnamed public figure who supported Israel was threatened and received anti-Semitic insults on social media, according to CIDI. Those who were recognizable as Jewish because of dress or outward appearance, for instance wearing a yarmulke, were targets of direct confrontations. CIDI stated it was particularly concerned about the increase of incidents at schools. Giving an initial assessment of the trend, CIDI reported 2015 numbers were lower than in 2014, but had also not decreased as much as expected based on long-term trends.

In September two men disguised as police officers broke into an apartment in Amsterdam and robbed and attacked a married couple, both Holocaust survivors. While taking all valuables, the men called the couple “dirty Jews” and beat them, breaking the man’s leg.

The Muslim community reported they faced frequent discrimination, intolerance and racism, particularly in public spaces. Following the January attack on the Charlie Hebdo office in France, Muslim women reported increased levels of harassment. At Amsterdam’s central train station, a man threw beer at two women and ripped off their headscarves. A woman wearing a headscarf was cursed at in a supermarket, and another was subjected to profanities while cycling through Amsterdam.

The most common anti-Semitic incidents took place over emails, on social media, and other online venues. The government-sponsored, editorially independent, Registration Center for Discrimination on the Internet (MDI) registered 328 anti-Semitic expressions (the most prevalent category) of which 188 were

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considered subject to punishment. According to CIDI, given the small size of the Jewish community, the occurrence of incidents was relatively high.

In April prosecutors convicted and sentenced a 14-year old girl to 50 hours of community service for threatening another girl in her classroom because she was Jewish.

MDI recorded 219 discriminatory expressions against Muslims, of which 118 were considered subject to punishment. MDI requested that the perpetrators remove the most egregious expressions from the internet. It reported eight cases to the police, five anti-Semitic and three anti-Muslim. A February poll of teachers, commissioned by the Anne Frank Foundation and the FORUM Institute for Multicultural Questions, found that two out of three teachers observed discrimination against Muslims in the classroom. The discrimination centered around offensive remarks about Islam and Muslims in general. The offenders were mostly native Dutch students, and the victims were of mostly Turkish or Moroccan ethnicity.

In June the government released results of research on anti-Semitism which showed that 12 percent of Muslim youth held a negative opinion of Jews, with some condoning physical and verbal violence. The research concluded that incidents in the Middle East, specifically between Israel and the Palestinian territories, triggered anger among Muslim youth. The government commissioned follow-up research on the potential causal link between negative sentiments and acts of anti-Semitism.

Professor Ineke van der Valk of the University of Amsterdam published research in March that found in the past decade an estimated one-third of the 475 mosques in the Netherlands had been confronted once or repeatedly with incidents of discriminatory aggression and violence, including vandalism, spraying of discriminatory texts, (attempted) arson, threatening letters, and the hanging of pig heads. At soccer matches involving the Amsterdam-based Ajax soccer team, whose fans adopted Jewish symbols, fans of opposing teams continued to use anti-Jewish slurs during games. On April 5, at a match between Ajax and FC Utrecht, supporters chanted “my father was with the commandos and my mother with the SS. Together they burned Jews because burning Jews is the best.” The prosecutor’s office initiated an investigation but failed to identify offenders. Justice Minister Adriaan Van der Steur publicly expressed disapproval and reported to parliament on work to counter anti-Jewish slurs at soccer games by the

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Royal Netherlands Soccer Association (KNVB) as well as local authorities, the police, the prosecutor's office, other soccer clubs, and the national government. The KNVB regularly consulted with Jewish organizations and other interested parties on the best course of action to combat this phenomenon.

Mosques across the country received threats or were vandalized. Vandals threw a paint bomb with an explosive at a mosque in Vlaardingen. In Leiden, individuals occupied a mosque and put up anti-Islam banners. Following the attack on Charlie Hebdo and a range of anti-Muslim incidents in Europe, the mosques jointly asked the government for better protection.

CIDI continued to conduct programs to counter prejudice against Jews and other minorities in schools. Continuing its outreach from previous years, CIDI invited 25 teachers to visit the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem for a seminar on Holocaust education. CIDI led workshops for the police and prosecutors to help them recognize anti-Semitism. The Intercultural Alliance Foundation, which includes Muslim and Jewish groups, continued to develop programs for use in schools highlighting religious belief and diversity. These included the Classroom of Difference program to train teachers in handling discrimination, and a peer training program to train participants to engage students in debates on tolerance.

The Liberal Jewish Community of Amsterdam continued to reach out to youth in the Get to Know Your Neighbors project, which invited students into its synagogue to introduce them to a temple and explain Jewish practices.

Multiple groups organized initiatives to bring Muslims and Jews together. For example, the Salaam-Shalom NGO in Amsterdam and the "Mo&Moos" initiative (short for Mohammed and Moshe) brought together young Muslim and Jewish professionals in Amsterdam to encourage leadership on interfaith issues. In Rotterdam the NGO Platform for Islamic Organizations in the Rotterdam Region (SPIOR) organized similar activities. The INS Platform, an NGO, created a website where local ethnic Dutch could meet "ordinary" Muslims in an effort to overcome prejudice.

SPIOR worked with CIDI and the Regional Anti-Discrimination Action Council on a report entitled *Monitoring Islamophobia in the Netherlands: An Explorative Study*, recommending better registration, prevention, awareness, and willingness to file complaints.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives emphasized in conversations with government officials, including the mayor of Rotterdam, members of the Amsterdam City Council, the president of the national platform on dealing with youth crime, and local Christian Democratic Appeal party politicians, the value of embracing religious diversity. The embassy and consulate general in Amsterdam pursued outreach to youth, academics, and women, highlighting the need for religious tolerance and interfaith understanding.

The Ambassador met with prominent Muslims to discuss religious freedom, discrimination against Muslims, integration issues, and efforts to bring the Jewish and Muslim communities closer together. Together with the U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities, the Ambassador met with Muslim community leaders in Amsterdam to hold similar discussions. They committed to continued dialogue and engagement with Muslim communities. The Consul General in Amsterdam hosted a Thanksgiving service where participants discussed interfaith tolerance and dialogue. The mayor of Amsterdam, NGOs, embassy officials, police, media, and religious organizations attended. The Ambassador and the Consul General continued to work with groups active in anti-discrimination work in the country, including the Anne Frank House. The embassy connected the Anne Frank House with individuals in several Muslim countries to facilitate exchange programs teaching the book *The Diary of Anne Frank* and religious tolerance.

Representatives from the embassy and consulate general met with a wide range of religious leaders throughout the year to highlight U.S. support for religious freedom. These meetings included discussions with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders about their perception of religious freedom within the country and issues of religious discrimination and possible solutions. The meetings included representatives from different religious groups within the three faiths. In an effort to reduce religious discrimination, the consulate general staff frequently met with an Amsterdam-based, youth-focused program run by both a Muslim and a rabbi that helped young Muslims expand their knowledge about the Jewish experience.