

THE NETHERLANDS 2016 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. In August Freedom Party (PVV) leader and opposition parliamentarian Geert Wilders presented an election platform for the March 2017 parliamentary elections calling for the “de-Islamization” of the country. The government required asylum seekers, many of whom were Muslim, to sign a statement of participation in civic integration before receiving a residence permit. It required imams from Islamic countries to complete an integration course before practicing. Government ministers continued to issue statements condemning anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents and updated the national action plan to counter anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments. The government established a working group to discuss security at Islamic institutions. Local governments provided security to all Jewish institutions and, upon request, to Islamic institutions.

There were reports of violence, threats, discrimination, verbal abuse, and vandalism against Muslims and Jews. In 2015, the most recent year for which data were available, police registered 439 anti-Muslim incidents - twice the number of the previous year - including assault, hate speech, discrimination, and vandalism, and local antidiscrimination boards recorded 240 incidents, a 45 percent increase. Police registered 428 complaints of discrimination against Jews in 2015, higher than the 358 in 2014. The Center for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported 126 anti-Semitic incidents in 2015, lower than the 171 in 2014, but “still higher than normal,” according to CIDI. Incidents included five cases of physical violence, harassment, and vandalism. There were 16 cases in schools, the highest such number in a decade. Groups said most occurrences went unreported. NGOs conducted programs to counter prejudice against Jews and Muslims.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials emphasized to government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, parliamentarians, and police in formal meetings and informal conversations, support for refugees of all faiths, the importance of integration for newcomers, and the value of interfaith dialogue. The U.S. embassy and the consulate general in Amsterdam met with different faith communities and civil society activists and 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 refugees and the embassy continued to work with groups combating discrimination, including the Anne Frank House.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 17 million (July 2016 estimate).

In a 2014 survey by government bureau Statistics Netherlands, 49 percent of the population declared no church affiliation, 24 percent self-identified as Roman Catholic, 7 percent as Reformed, 6 percent as Calvinist, 3 percent as other Protestant denominations, 5 percent as Muslim, and 6 percent as “other,” including Hindu, Jewish, and Buddhist.

Most Muslims live in urban areas and are of Turkish, Moroccan, or Surinamese background. The Muslim population also includes immigrants and asylum seekers from other countries including Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tel Aviv University’s Stephen Roth Institute, a research institute, and the Council of Europe estimate the Jewish population 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 governmental 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 outside of buildings or enclosed spaces to protect health, for traffic safety, or to prevent disorder.

The law makes it a crime to engage in public speech that incites religious hatred, and provides a penalty of imprisonment for up to two years, a fine of up to 8,100

euros (\$8,500), or both. In order to qualify as hate speech, the statements must be directed at a group of people; the law does not consider statements targeted at a philosophy or religion, such as “Islam” as opposed to “Muslims,” as 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 exemptions from all taxes, including income, value added, and property taxes, if the tax authorities determine they meet specific criteria. 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.

A number of federal government institutions, including the Council of State and the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (NIHR), are responsible for reviewing complaints of religious discrimination. The NIHR is also charged with providing advice to the government on issues involving religious discrimination.

Local governments appoint antidiscrimination boards that work independently 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 to the interior ministry, including those pertaining to discrimination based on religion. Acceptance of mediation decisions by parties involved in disputes is voluntary.

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. The constitution stipulates standards required of religious or ideology-based (termed “special”) schools, financed either in part or fully by the government, are regulated by law with due regard for the freedom of these schools to provide education according to their religion or ideology.

The constitution stipulates public education shall pay due respect to the individual’s religion or belief, and the law permits religious education in public schools. All schools are obligated to familiarize students with various spiritual

movements in society regardless of the religious affiliation of the school. Religion-based schools are free to shape religious education, as long as the education inspectorate sees that such education does not incite criminal offenses.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The NIHR and municipal antidiscrimination boards continued to address 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 grounds pertaining to the nature of the work. In practice, headscarves were permitted almost everywhere, including in schools.

On November 29, the lower house of parliament approved legislation proposed by the cabinet in 2015 that would ban face covering clothing, including burqas, in certain public places where it said identification was essential, including in government buildings, schools, hospitals, and on public transportation. The proposed legislation generated considerable societal debate. Muslim organizations, for example, SPIOR, the umbrella organization of Islamic organizations in the Rotterdam region, said the legislation would stigmatize Muslims, and targeted only approximately 100 to 150 persons in the country who wear the burqa. Geert Wilders, leader of the anti-immigrant populist Freedom Party (PVV), argued for a burqa ban in all public spaces. Other political parties who voted in favor of the ban viewed it as part of integration efforts. These parties argued that an open society requires open communication, unhindered by a burqa. Religious freedom was not part of the debate. The senate had not voted on the legislation at year's end.

On March 9, the Amsterdam Court of Appeals acquitted a man of hate speech after he used offensive language about Muslims in a television interview. The court found he had made his inflammatory statements in the context of a political debate, where such statements might offend, shock, or disturb, and therefore did not rise to the level of insulting a religion.

On January 5, the prosecutor's office fined a police instructor 350 euros (\$370) for a Facebook post in which he wrote: "I hate Muslims, period. I have had it with Muslims. I hope that they will quickly all die a slow death. Death to Islam." The

prosecutor considered the latter comment about Islam permissible under the law because it criticized a religion rather than its followers.

Parliament passed a motion in December 2015 calling on the cabinet to consider banning Salafist organizations because the country's security services reportedly considered them a "breeding ground for jihadism." In February the cabinet rejected the ban after debating eight non-binding resolutions related to the practice of Salafism in the country, including a proposal to limit the exemption of religious groups against criminal prosecution, and a call to ban foreign financing of Salafist mosques. One resolution, sponsored by Ahmed Marcouch, a member of the Labor Party, again called upon the government to investigate the possibility of banning all Salafist organizations. Marcouch stated in his resolution "it is not about religious freedom because Salafism is an anti-democratic and intolerant ideology, not a religion, and its proponents believe in their supremacy over others." The government repeatedly ruled out a ban on Salafism, stating it would violate freedom of religion, and was considering, at year's end, ways of improving transparency of foreign funding for all religious organizations.

Government ministers frequently spoke out against anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and general discrimination in speeches. On November 2, Justice and Security Minister Ard van der Steur stated, "Persons in the Netherlands must be free to exercise their religious beliefs. Violence against Muslims and mosques is unacceptable. The police and prosecutor's office must take firm action." On March 1, Dutch First Vice President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans stated on Facebook, "The Netherlands must remain a country where people can profess their religion and conviction in freedom and without fear. Nobody should be afraid to be openly who he is...Muslim, Jew, Christian, nonbeliever or whatever." Commenting on the rise of anti-Muslim incidents, Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb, a Muslim, stated May 25, "The debate on the excesses of Islam and Muslims in relation to terrorism has become a license to offend and discriminate against people. That's unacceptable." In September Minister of Education Jet Bussemaker spoke out against religious discrimination in awarding vocational internships. The minister launched programs for vocational students and teachers in the country's five largest cities to train them to recognize discrimination, including religious discrimination.

On August 25, PVV leader and opposition parliamentarian Geert Wilders presented an election platform for the March 2017 parliamentary elections calling for the "de-Islamization" of the country through refusing all asylum seekers and immigrants from Islamic countries, prohibiting headscarves in public, closing all

mosques and Islamic schools, banning the Quran, and prohibiting any Islamic expression that violated public order.

In December a court convicted Wilders of inciting discrimination and insulting a racial group following remarks he made about Moroccans at a rally in 2014, but did not prescribe any punishment. The court acquitted Wilders of inciting hatred.

The government used newspaper advertisements, internet outreach, and public service announcements to encourage victims to report discrimination, including on religious grounds. On September 2, Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations Ronald Plasterk launched a new national campaign “to knock down” discrimination, including religious discrimination. The campaign included posters, television commercials, and outreach activities by well-known personalities.

The government updated its national action plan to counter discrimination, which included specific measures to counter anti-Semitism, including efforts to stimulate dialogue between key figures in the Jewish and Muslim communities and to promote debate among Muslim youth to advance diversity and tolerance. The government signed agreements with major social media organizations such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to counter discrimination on the internet by addressing or removing discriminatory language. The government consulted stakeholders, including the Royal Netherlands Soccer Association (KNVB), local authorities, police officials, the prosecutor’s office, and soccer clubs, to counter discrimination and anti-Semitic chanting and salutes during soccer matches. Participants agreed on measures to prosecute offenders or ban them from stadiums.

Deputy Prime Minister Lodewijk Asscher and Security and Justice Minister Van der Steur met with key figures from the Jewish and Muslim communities on March 15 to discuss the increase in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents. They discussed how to build bridges between these communities and best ways to counter these trends. In February Asscher said he had stopped reacting on social media to spiteful comments made against him because of his Jewish background.

The national government placed high-level attention on mosque security. It established a special working group to discuss security questions, which included representatives of the Muslim community, the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NTCV), the police, and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

Local governments continued to provide all Jewish institutions with security, and to provide security to Muslim institutions at their request. Local governments based their security on a threat-and-risk analysis.

The government commissioned research into the causes and trigger factors of Muslim discrimination among youth in order to determine how to design policies to address such behavior. Results were expected in early 2017.

The government required asylum seekers to sign a statement of participation in civic integration in order to obtain a residence permit. The statement informed immigrants of their rights and obligations and of fundamental values, including freedom of religion.

According to CIDI, Jewish community leaders stated there was insufficient coverage of the Holocaust in the school curriculum.

In September King Willem-Alexander advocated freedom of religion and belief during his speech opening the parliamentary year.

The government continued to require imams and other spiritual leaders recruited in Islamic countries to complete an integration course before practicing. This requirement did not apply to Turkish nationals, including approximately 140 imams appointed by that country's religious affairs directorate, the Diyanet, in accordance with an association agreement between the European Union and Turkey.

The government sponsored leadership courses with the intention of facilitating imam training in the Dutch language without foreign interference.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of violence, threats, discrimination, verbal abuse, and vandalism against Muslims and Jews. Agencies collecting data on such incidents stated many occurrences were never reported. The police and various monitoring bodies, including anti-discrimination boards, reported a sharp increase of incidents of discrimination against Muslims after terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015. In 2015, the most recent year for which figures were available, the police registered

439 incidents, including of violence, harassment, and verbal abuse, against Muslims, compared to 206 in 2014, and the antidiscrimination boards registered 240 incidents, compared with 165 in 2014. SPIOR registered 231 reports of incidents of violence and discrimination in the Rotterdam area between January 2015 and March 2016. Over the same period, Rotterdam police only received reports of 41 incidents against Muslims. The Complaints Bureau for Discrimination on the Internet (MDI), an NGO, recorded 330 expressions against Muslims on the internet in 2015, compared to 219 in 2014, while the government's internet discrimination hotline (MIND) recorded 142 expressions against Muslims in 2015, compared to 20 in 2014.

The police registered 428 complaints of discrimination against Jews in 2015, compared to 358 in 2014. CIDI, which tracked anti-Semitic incidents, except for those occurring online, reported 126 incidents in 2015 compared with 171 in 2014, but qualified the 2015 figure as "still higher than the normal level in a year without military intervention in Israel." There were five incidents of physical violence, which CIDI said was relatively high, and fewer incidents of harassment in the street and through email. In one incident, a non-Jewish woman married to a Moroccan Jew was confronted by the parents of her daughter's classmates at school over her relationship. A man grabbed the woman by the throat, called her a "Jew's whore," and threatened to shoot her. There were 18 incidents of vandalism. CIDI also reported 16 incidents at schools, the highest number of such incidents it recorded in a decade. There were twice as many incidents (10) of anti-Semitic chanting during soccer matches than in 2014. According to CIDI, those who were recognizable as Jewish because of dress or outward appearance, for instance wearing a yarmulke, were sometimes targets of direct confrontations.

MDI received 142 reports of online expressions of anti-Semitism and/or Holocaust denial in 2015, compared to 328 in 2014; and MIND received 46, compared to 31 in 2014.

In their annual report on racism, anti-Semitism, and extreme violence in the country in 2015, the Verwey Jonker Institute and Anne Frank Foundation reported 57 incidents of anti-Semitism, compared to 76 in 2014, and 424 incidents of anti-Semitic shouting, compared to 710 in 2014. Incidents of anti-Semitism included 18 incidents of insults, 12 cases of threats, two cases of bullying, and five cases of physical abuse. In one incident, three boys threw a brick at two men on the way to a synagogue; the brick missed its target. In another, a man yelled at a Jewish man in an elevator of an apartment building, leading to a fight.

On April 29, half a dozen men assaulted a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf on a tram in Rotterdam. The perpetrators poured beer over her and tore off her headscarf. SPIOR Director Marianne Vorthoren said women and children were often victims of anti-Muslim discrimination. She also said that the physical and verbal abuse often went unreported due to fear of retaliation from the perpetrators. She added that bystanders rarely intervened or reported incidents to the police, leaving perpetrators free to engage in harassment without fear of consequences.

Christians complained about intimidation by Muslims in asylum centers. According to managers of refugee centers, there were instances of scuffles or fights between individual refugees, often of different religions, but there were no riots or incidents of mass violence.

In April Ynetnews, an Israeli news site, reported an upsurge in anti-Semitic incidents in the country. The article quoted the country's Chief Rabbi, Benjamin Jacobs, as saying, "People are debating removing the mezuzahs from their doorposts, since they identify them as Jews."

The Ministry of Education commissioned a report on discrimination in education, which commented extensively on deep-rooted anti-Semitism in classrooms in certain schools with a high percentage of migrant Muslim students and how teachers felt helpless combatting these sometimes violent sentiments. The report cited one Amsterdam high school teacher, who recalled an incident in which a female student of Moroccan descent stood up and pronounced, "If I had a Kalashnikov [automatic rifle], I'd gun down all the Jews."

Platform Integration & Society (KIS), an NGO, reported March 21 that girls wearing headscarves had more difficulty finding an internship required for college graduation than other students.

In June a man sustained anti-Semitic verbal abuse from several motorists after hanging his son's schoolbag from the pole of an Israeli flag in celebration of his son's high school graduation. Passers-by yelled "rotten Jews," "we're going to get you, cancer Zionists," and "rotten Zionists."

On June 13, a court convicted a man of hate speech and sentenced him to two weeks in prison for posting signs with swastikas on his windows reading "Turks go away" and "Gas Jews."

In May CIDI filed complaints with the police against soccer fans chanting “My father is with the commandos and my mother with the SS. Together they burn Jews because Jews burn the best.” The police responded that they were “looking into” the incident.

Other anti-Semitic incidents took place over email, social media, and other online venues. For example, there were reports a Jewish man tweeting about developments in Turkey received messages such as “Hey, Jew, the best thing that ever happened to you is that Hitler, the best man, has existed.” In another case, a Jewish teacher reportedly received an online message from students calling her “Cancer Jew.”

Professor Ineke van der Valk of the University of Amsterdam, researcher of anti-Muslim sentiment and discrimination, stated mosques often did not report incidents in order to avoid publicity or increased attention. She recorded 18 incidents against mosques in the first two months of 2016, including vandalism, attempted arson, threatening letters, and the hanging of pigs’ heads.

On February 27, individuals threw Molotov cocktails at a mosque in Enschede, causing a minor fire. Authorities arrested five men and tried and convicted them on October 27 of attempted arson with terrorist intent. The court sentenced the men to four years’ imprisonment, of which one year was suspended.

In January a pig’s head was found outside of the Turkish Hakyol mosque in Mijdrecht.

In February, 10 mosques received threatening letters containing swastikas and texts with messages such as, “You will soon receive important visitors, pigs,” and “Islam is the devil’s religion.”

Individuals left dead pigs and pigs’ heads at refugee centers, where many refugees were Muslim. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. In January the police removed two dead pigs from a proposed center for 500 refugees in the Brabant village of Heesch. Signs nearby read “the people say no to the AZC (asylum center) and 500 is too many.” In February media reported two dead pigs were found at a potential site for a refugee center in the city of Ede. A day earlier in Ede, PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West), a European nationalist group founded in Germany, had protested against an inflow of refugees into the city. During the protest, PEGIDA’s leader in the

country, Edwin Wagenveld, was arrested for refusing to remove a hat shaped like a pig.

On August 15, slogans were spray-painted on an elementary school building and on twenty houses in the town of Voorburg, including “ISIS” and “Kill all Jews.”

CIDI continued to conduct programs to counter prejudice against Jews and other minorities in schools. CIDI again 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 at the police academy to help them recognize anti-Semitism.

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 continued to organize 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 SPIOR organized similar activities. The INS Platform, an NGO, created a website where citizens could meet “ordinary” Muslims in an effort to overcome prejudice.

Jewish groups welcomed the Protestant Church’s official condemnation in April of anti-Jewish statements made by Martin Luther 500 years earlier.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy emphasized in conversations with government officials, including the mayor of Rotterdam, the national police, parliamentarians, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of the Amsterdam City Council, and the president of the national platform on dealing with youth crime, the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy and the consulate general in Amsterdam highlighted the need for religious tolerance and interfaith understanding in outreach to youth, academics, and women.

The Ambassador met with Muslim refugees and visited several refugee centers to discuss religious freedom, discrimination against Muslims and integration issues, and made efforts to bring communities closer together. The consul general in

Amsterdam hosted a Thanksgiving service where city government officials, civil society activists, and leaders in various faith communities discussed interfaith tolerance and dialogue. The embassy continued to work with groups active in anti-discrimination work in the country, including the Anne Frank House. The embassy continued to connect 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, including the Liberal Jewish Community and Muslim community throughout the year to highlight U.S. support for religious freedom. They attended iftars led by local political parties and the national police during Ramadan, and a seder organized by the Liberal Jewish Community. These iftars and seders included discussions with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian leaders about their perceptions of religious freedom within the country and issues of religious discrimination and possible solutions, including efforts to learn more about others who practice different faiths. The meetings included representatives from different religious groups within the three faiths. Embassy staff frequently met with mosques and SPIOR to discuss diversity, faith, integration, and violent extremism.