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Amsterdam

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Demographics

The city of Amsterdam is divided into 15 city districts. The districts with significant Muslim populations include De Baarsjes, Geuzeveld/Slotermeer, Oud-West, Oost-Watergraafsmeer, Slotervaart, Bos en Lommer, and Osdorp (OSI 51).

Nationwide, the majority of Muslims in the Netherlands live in Amsterdam, and comprise approximately 13% of the city's total population (Expatica 2004). The city of Amsterdam's total population is about 750,000; as of 2004, approximately 63,000 inhabitants are of Moroccan descent, and 38,000 of Turkish descent - the two largest Muslim communities in Amsterdam. In addition, there are an estimated 5,000 Egyptians, 5,000 Pakistanis, and an undetermined number of Muslims of the 71,000 Surinamese inhabitants in the capital city (OSI 51).

Employment and Economic Activity

Research in Amsterdam shows that entrepreneurship is popular among the city's Egyptian, Pakistani, and Indian communities. Most ethnic businesses are small, and two-thirds of them are one-man businesses - as opposed to 44% of the businesses directed by Dutch persons. Subsequently, only 5% of minority businesses have the legal 'BV' or liability form - one fourth that of the greater Dutch population (De Feijter, in EUMC 17).

Wage-discrimination is rampant among minorities in Amsterdam. In a 2002 study carried out by the University of Amsterdam, a survey found that the gross hourly wages for ethnic minorities were 13.20 euros; in comparison, native Dutch employees earned 14.90 euros for the same time and work (Tijdens, in EUMC 43).

Education

As of 2002, there are eight Islamic primary schools, and one Islamic secondary school in Amsterdam. According to the Schools Inspectorate, seven of the eight Islamic primary schools performed well in promoting integration and social cohesion in Dutch society. The eight primary school - the Siddieq School, founded in 1989, was the only school that needed to strive for "a better balance between, on the one hand passing identity-bounded norms and values, and on the other hand, norms that ease the participation of pupils in Dutch society" (OSI 51).

At the beginning of the 2007 school year, all Dutch Islamic primary schools will have access to an official teaching curriculum about Islam, for pupils between the ages of four and twelve. The curriculum, the first of its kind in the Netherlands, was first presented at the As Soeffah school in Amsterdam. The method in the teaching lessons was developed by the Foundation for Teaching Methods (SLO) and the Board of Islamic Schools Organization (ISBO) - an umbrella organization of forty-two Muslim schools in the Netherlands. In the 2007 academic year, all 42 of the ISBO schools as well as four other Islamic schools in the Netherlands will begin to apply the new study material (Expatica 2007).

Among nationwide initiatives, Amsterdam has been active in making religious instruction available to residents. The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, or Amsterdam's Free University has begun cycles of course work in theology, in order to accommodate the installation of a school for imams. In 2005, a master's course for Islamic spiritual caregivers started was offered to encourage religious leaders to have a more formal and accredited background (EP 39, 162).

The banning of headscarves by Muslim women is not explicit in the Netherlands, nor in the capital city. The prevailing opinion is that the wearing may be banned on narrow grounds, such as specific security considerations or in contradictions to particular uniforms. However, the CGB (Equal Opportunities Committee) stated in 2003 that a recent ban by Amsterdam schools on wearing burqas or face coverings was discriminatory. Reasoning for this was supported by the need for open student-teacher interaction as predominant over the need to wear a face covering. In 2005, the Parliament adopted a resolution urging the Government to ban the public wearing of face coverings. The integration minister that a comprehensive ban was not possible under the law, but said that the ban may be permissible in case-specific scenarios such as in school or in the workforce (US Department of State).

In 2003 at a higher vocational college in Amsterdam, three students were banned for wearing a face covering. Police forcibly removed one female student as she tried to enter the school; the school was in the legal right, arguing that unauthorized entry is trespass. The school justified the ban on the grounds that the face covering hindered eye contact - a necessary part of mutual respect. The students appealed to the Dutch Equality Commission, but ruled in favor of the school (Pedagogiek).

Religious Life in Amsterdam

As of 2002, there are a total of 44 mosques in the city (OSI 51). There are several different Muslim platforms that represent the full range of cultural, ethnic, and spiritual diversity which comprises Amsterdam's Muslims.

One of the city's most conservative mosques is El-Tawheed, pursuing a Salifiyya vision. El-Tawheed mosque has been accused of preaching radical ideologies, and has been under heightened scrutiny since the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, whose murderer Mohammed Bouyeri has prayed at the mosque. In 2004, the Dutch domestic security AVID said it was watching El-Tawheed closely. Before Mr. Bouyeri's crime, the mosque had been under scrutiny for selling books justifying female circumcision and called for the killing of homosexuals. Dismissing the concern that the El-Tawheed mosque spreads radicalism, Abdelkarim At-Tetouani, a member and former chairman of the mosque's youth committee says that the doors are always open for visitors and security personnel (Financial Times).

Amsterdam's first women-only mosque was opened in March 2005. The mosque is entirely run by women, including the call to prayer and leading or prayer. Inaugurated by Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Saadawi, the opening of the mosque drew both applaud and criticism. Supporters lauded the inaugural step as a milestone to meet the spiritual needs of Muslim women, and as a meeting place where women can feel comfortable in the face of feelings of isolation and male dominated religious life. Others cited the opening as a government funded prop to boost "liberal" Islam (Turks.us).

Many types of Muslims organizations are active in Amsterdam, including mosque, youth, women's, umbrella, and cultural organizations. As of 2000, there were 20 Turkish religious organizations in Amsterdam. Of these, seven belong to the Turkish Islamic Cultural Federation (TICF), which is connected to the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Three belong to the Federation Islamic Centre for the Netherlands (Stichting Islamitisch Centrum Nederland), ten were affiliated with the Milli Gorus movement, and three represented the Alevi Turks (Van Heelsum 2000, in OSI 51).

As of 2001, there were 30 Moroccan Muslim organizations in Amsterdam. Several of these belong to the Union of Moroccan Muslim Organizations in the Netherlands (UMMON). Presently, there is also

the Urban Moroccan Council and a union of Moroccan Mosques in Amsterdam and Surroundings (UMMAO) (Van Heelsum 2001, in OSI 51).

In 2006, Dutch alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb proposed introducing legislation that would allow the city of Amsterdam to cut welfare payments to those women who insist on wearing a burqa or face covering, if it can be proven that the garb prevents her from finding a job. Aboutaleb told the Dutch women's magazine *Opzij* "In that case, I say: off with the burqa and apply for work. If you don't want to do that, that's fine, but you don't get a benefit payment." Member of Amsterdam's Labor Party and Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent, Aboutaleb made the comments in response to a ruling made by Holland's Equality Commission siding with a woman who refused to shake hands with men at work (*Spiegel Online*). In March 2007, the fourth coalition government of Prime Minister Balkenende decided not to enact the ban (*Dutch News*).

Launched in Amsterdam in 2007, a Dutch committee called the 'Central committee for Ex-Muslims' was created to aid Muslims who wish to leave Islam through the constitutional right of freedom of religion. The committee has urged the Dutch government to offer more help for ex-Muslims in exile (*The Times Online*).

Civic Life

In 2003, the Amsterdam municipal position on integration was explained in a memorandum. In this, the municipal council's attitude was a positive one, citing diversity and migration as integral to the urban character of the city. The memorandum encouraged the government to focus on the civic integration of new inhabitants and create adequate facilities that are geared towards the city's diverse populations. Furthermore, the promotion of integration was not to be exclusive for newcomers, but to encourage all inhabitants of Amsterdam to join in an integrative city development (OSI 52).

There are several prominent local politicians in Amsterdam with Muslim backgrounds. Among these include Ahmed Aboutaleb (from the Alderman municipal) and Ahmed Marcouch (chairman of the city district of Slotervaart) (OSI 52).

Public Perception and Community Life

New initiatives are consistently being developed by citizens of Amsterdam to involve an active Muslim participation. Two such campaigns are "Are you afraid of me?" and the "Ramadan Festival." The Ramadan Festival began in 2005 with the intended goals of engaging in dialogue with the greater city community and closing the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims in Amsterdam. The festival has continued each Ramadan thenceforth. The "Are you afraid of me?" campaign seeks to dissuade stereotypes and assumptions based on such attributes like skin color and clothing (OSI 51).

Events in Recent Years

The murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 was a dramatic event that concerned Muslims in the capital city. Committed by a radical Amsterdam Muslim of Moroccan descent, the murder sparked both conflicts and dialogue concerning the Muslim community. The municipality developed a program entitled "We the people of Amsterdam," aimed at combating terrorism, the resistance of radicalism, and prevention of polarizing groups. The starting basis of the program was to encourage democratic citizenship, make norms and rules of behavior explicit, combat discrimination and exclusion, and strengthen identification of all residents in the city. Strengthening, and not constraining democracy was emphasized as the best approach to combat extremism and encourage community solidarity

(OSI 52).

Within the framework of the "We the people of Amsterdam" campaign, the municipality has paid a great deal of attention to supporting projects that contribute to the development of the city's Muslim community. In 2005, the city initiated a conference on the societal role of mosques. The municipality has also published a study on the number of studies on facilities for Islamic religious practice, the housing for minority religious practices, and burial and cemetery needs for Muslims in Amsterdam. (OSI 52)

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Acronyms

DUMC - Dutch Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia

EP - European Parliament

EUMC - Euroepan Monitoring Centre on Rcism and Xenophobia

OSI - Open Society Institute