



# How to respond to Quran desecrations?

What we can learn from earlier incidents

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Bibi van Ginkel and Peter Knoope

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International Centre for  
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# Contents

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<b>About ICCT</b>	iii
<b>Abstract</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	2
<b>Recent Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark</b>	2
<b>Quran desecrations in the Netherlands</b>	3
<b>Discussing the limitations of freedom of speech and freedom of association</b>	5
<b>Lessons learned for an effective policy response</b>	5
<b>Recommendations</b>	8
<b>Bibliography</b>	10
<b>About the Authors</b>	12

## Abstract

In 2008, the Dutch government prepared a strategic communications campaign to prevent and to manage a potential fall out in terms of polarisation in society and rising security risks as a result of the broadcasting of the Islam-critical movie 'Fitna', produced by a Dutch politician. The Dutch government learned lessons from the response by the Danish government to the Mohammed cartoon riots in 2005 to inform its own strategic communication campaign. The authors of this Policy Brief reflect on the lessons of this successful campaign to offer recommendations to governments on how to respond to the recent Quran desecrations.

**Keywords:** freedom of speech, hate speech, provocation, strategic communication, polarisation, terrorist threats

## Introduction

On 16 October 2023, the city of Brussels was once again the location of a terrorist attack. This time, a Tunisian asylum seeker killed two Swedish football supporters, who were in town for a football match between Belgium and Sweden. The perpetrator had posted a message on social media stating he had targeted Swedes “as revenge in the name of all Muslims”.<sup>1</sup> Before this attack, Western security services had already raised the alarm due to several incidents where a Quran was desecrated causing angry responses in the Muslim world. They raised the alarm because apart from a clear threat against their Embassies, chatter has also intercepted on online media platforms where terrorist organisations was for violent actions against these desecrations specifically in Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands. In addition to the security concerns, policy discussions raised on whether these clear provocations should be allowed under the banner of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly and demonstration, or whether the best way to curb the emerging national security risks is by prohibiting these manifestations or criminalizing the public burning of the Quran. In this Policy Brief, the handling of the broadcasting of the Islam-critical movie ‘Fitna’, produced by a Dutch member of parliament in 2008, is revisited, drawing lessons for the governments now dealing with the Quran desecrations.

## Recent Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark

At the beginning of 2023, while the world was focussed on the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Swedish application for NATO membership became insecure, partly due to a Quran burning by the Danish-Swedish far-right politician Rasmus Paludan in front of the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm.<sup>2</sup> This was not the first time that Paludan had publicly burned a Quran either. As a result, Turkey immediately suspended negotiations with Sweden regarding NATO membership. Several other Muslim Majority States (MMS) like Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Kuwait also denounced the burning of the Quran, calling for dialogue and tolerance, and actions against the spreading of hate speech.<sup>3</sup> This incident marked the beginning of a series of incidents in Sweden and Denmark during the summer of 2023. Salwan Momika, a refugee from Iraq now living in Sweden, protested in front of the Stockholm Mosque at the end of June 2023 calling for a ban on the Quran in Sweden.<sup>4</sup> During the protest, the former Christian turned atheist ripped out pages of the Quran and set fire to them. He also placed a strip of bacon into the Quran to further desecrate it. The event took place during Eid al-Adha, which is an important Islamic holiday. In the midst of this manifestation, Muslims were distributing expensive chocolate amongst the crowds in front of the mosque, possibly in an attempt to engage with the population and send out a message for open dialogue.<sup>5</sup>

The responses in Arab countries were less friendly. The announcement of the Quran burning itself, already triggered a big crowd to storm the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad and set fire to the premises. The Iraqi government, although denouncing the arson, also responded by breaking diplomatic relations with Sweden and expelling the Swedish Ambassador.<sup>6</sup> Other MMS like Iran,

1 “How Quran burnings in Sweden have increased threats from Islamic militants”, *Associate Press*, 17 October 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/sweden-quran-desecration-attack-belgium-0b2b52e448823377d9ed42493960faf6>.

2 “Protests in Stockholm, including Koran-burning, draw condemnation from Turkey”, *Reuters*, 22 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-cancels-swedish-defence-minister-visit-after-protest-permit-2023-01-21/>.

3 “Countries summon Sweden’s envoys to protest against Quran burning”, *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/21/countries-summon-swedens-ambassadors-to-protest-quran-burning>.

4 Nils Adler, “Quran desecrated at Sweden mosque during Eid al-Adha”, *Al Jazeera*, 28 June, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/28/quran-desecrated-in-sweden-during-eid-al-adha-holiday>.

5 Nils Adler, “Chocolates and a chat: A peaceful response to Quran burnings in Sweden”, *Al Jazeera*, 28 August, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/8/counter-protests-quran-burning>.

6 Associated Press, “Protesters storm Swedish Embassy in Baghdad ahead of planned Quran burning in Stockholm”,

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and United Arab Emirates summoned their Swedish Ambassador over these incidents.<sup>7</sup> These countries also saw thousands of angry Muslims protesting in the street against these acts.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, a misinformation campaign against Sweden which originally started in 2021, claiming Sweden kidnaps Muslim children, caught momentum again. The site was traced back to an Arabic-language site, whose creator claims allegiance to ISIS.<sup>9</sup>

More desecrations followed in Stockholm, as well as Quran burnings in Denmark in front of the embassies of several MMS, which again sparked protests against both the Swedish and Danish embassies in several Arab countries. In August, a woman was arrested who sprayed Momika with a fire extinguisher when he tried to burn the Quran again.<sup>10</sup> No actions were taken against Momika or others in Denmark who were setting up manifestations where Qurans were ripped or burned. The Swedish government did, however, in July denounce the Islamophobic act of the burning of the Quran.<sup>11</sup>

On 17 August 2023, considering the string of events and the continued protests in MMS, the Swedish government raised the threat level for potential terrorist attacks from 'elevated' (level 3) to 'high' (level 4) on a 5-level scale.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Sweden is considering reforming Sweden's Public Order Act that would enable police to stop Quran burnings in cases where this would pose a clear threat to national security.<sup>13</sup> Denmark, however, is taking it a step further and has announced the criminalization of public desecration of religious scriptures.<sup>14</sup> Conviction of such crime will lead to punishments up to two years of imprisonment.

## Quran desecrations in the Netherlands

Since the beginning of 2023 the Netherlands has also seen various incidents of manifestations where the Quran was shredded. Edwin Wagenveld, the frontman of Pegida, a far-right anti-Muslim party, staged various demonstrations including in front of the Parliament building in January, at the City Hall in Amsterdam, one-man manifestations in Leiden and Utrecht, and at the Turkish Embassy in The Hague in August. Since burning is prohibited during public demonstrations based on public order regulations of the municipality, Wagenveld instead tore out pages of the Quran and danced on the pages on the floor.<sup>15</sup> Another political party 'Denk', asked the Mayor

*NBC News*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/protesters-sweden-embassy-baghdad-quran-burning-stockholm-rcna95252>.

7 "Countries summon Sweden's envoys to protest against Quran burning", *Al Jazeera*, 21 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/21/countries-summon-swedens-ambassadors-to-protest-quran-burning>.

8 Abby Sewell, "Thousands of Muslims took to the streets to express outrage over Quran desecration in Sweden," *AP News*, 23 July, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iraq-iran-sweden-quran-protests-bb61c10405423266b18c1073d5ce97f0>.

9 "Sweden hits out at 'disinformation' on child kidnappings", *Associate Press*, 3 February 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-sweden-government-social-services-kidnapping-e55c6196609d102bfe079d7c40c9ed7b>.

10 "Woman arrested after spraying Quran burner with fire extinguisher in Sweden", *Al Jazeera*, 18 August 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/18/woman-arrested-after-spraying-quran-burner-with-fire-extinguisher-in-sweden>.

11 "Sweden government condemns 'Islamophobic' Quran burning", *Al Jazeera*, 2 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/2/sweden-government-condemns-islamophobic-quran-burning>.

12 "Swedish Security Service raises terror threat level", *Government Services of Sweden*, 21 August 2023, <https://www.government.se/articles/2023/08/swedish-security-service-raises-terror-threat-level/#:~:text=The%20Swedish%20Security%20Service%20has,to%20take%20the%20necessary%20measures>.

13 Armani Syed, "Why Quran Burning Is Making Sweden and Denmark So Anxious," *Time*, 27 August, 2023, <https://time.com/6303348/quran-burning-sweden-denmark/>.

14 Burak Bir, "Swedish premier says he 'respects' Denmark's plan to criminalize desecration of Quran," *Anadolu Agency*, 25 August, 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/swedish-premier-says-he-respects-denmarks-plan-to-criminalize-desecration-of-quran/2976448>.

15 Danny Verbaan, "Verscheuren van Koran is volgens burgemeester onder voorwaarden toegestaan (According to the mayor, tearing up the Koran is allowed under certain conditions)" *West*, 25 January, 2023, <https://www>.

of The Hague to prohibit the demonstrations. However, the Mayor explained that the right to demonstration is a fundamental right that should be upheld, and no laws are broken by the tearing of the Quran. The Minister of Justice also responded in a letter to Parliament in January 2023 that although appalling, the actions are lawful and protected by fundamental rights.<sup>16</sup>

After the first demonstration in January, however, multiple criminal complaints of group insult were filed with the public prosecutor's office<sup>17</sup>, who decided to prosecute him on these grounds, simultaneously stating that tearing the Quran itself is not a crime. The case is currently in court pending a decision.<sup>18</sup> These demonstrations also spurred various counter-demonstrations in the Netherlands and responses in MMS. In February, approximately 15 people were arrested in Turkey for alleged plots against Western diplomatic missions, including the Dutch Consulate in Istanbul.<sup>19</sup> Both in January<sup>20</sup> and in August,<sup>21</sup> after the manifestation at the Turkish Embassy, the Dutch Ambassador was summoned by the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs. The deputy Ambassador explained that he considered the shredding of the Quran tasteless and purposefully provocative and appalling, but also underlined there is freedom of speech, stating it is ultimately up to the court to decide whether any criminal laws were broken.<sup>22</sup>

Although, all responses by Dutch authorities seem very formal, the security agencies have in the meantime also warned of an increased risk of terrorist attacks.<sup>23</sup> Specific threats have been vocalised by the Afghan branch of ISIS calling for attacks against infidels. Videos circulated in these circles also showcase the Pegida leader. The Dutch National Coordinator's Office on Security and Counterterrorism warns that supporters of ISIS in the Netherlands and Europe in particular are in contact with international networks in Afghanistan, Syria, and Turkey who are plotting new attacks in the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup>

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omroepwest.nl/nieuws/4679181/verscheuren-van-koran-is-volgens-burgemeester-onder-voorwaarden-toegestaan.

16 "Onderwerp Reactie minister J en V 'Koranverscheuring door Pegida (Subject Response of Minister J and V 'Koran tearing by Pegida)'" , *Ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid*, 24 February 2023, <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-ae054c129309f18d12fcf3cbcd69672cf31a3491/pdf>.

17 According to the Dutch Criminal Code, article 37c the crime of group insult occurs when someone deliberately insults a group of people or part of the population based on race, religion or belief, gender or physical features. Maximum punishment of one year imprisonment or a monetary fine of the third category. Prosecution of such crimes often go hand in hand with article 37 d of the Dutch Criminal Code on the prohibition of incitement to hate, discrimination or violence. When ruling on these crimes, the court has to take article 10 European Convention on Human Rights on the freedom to free speech into account. MP Geert Wilders, in relation to statements made during an election campaign meeting, was convicted for these crimes in 2016 (Rechtbank Den Haag, 2016:15014, NJFS 2017/22).

18 "Pegida-voorman die koran verscheurde verdacht van groepsbelediging (Pegida leader who tore up the Quran suspected of insulting a group)", *NOS Nieuws*, 14 April 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2471403-pegida-voorman-die-koran-verscheurde-verdacht-van-groepsbelediging>.

19 Rob Vreeken, "Turkije pakt verdachten op na mogelijke dreiging IS bij Nederlands consulaat in Istanbul (Turkey arrests suspects after possible IS threat at Dutch consulate in Istanbul)" *De Volkskrant*, 5 February, 2023, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/turkije-pakt-verdachten-op-na-mogelijke-dreiging-is-bij-nederlands-consulaat-in-istanbul~b990734d/>.

20 "Nederlandse ambassadeur in Turkije op het matje wegens eenmans koranprotest (Dutch ambassador to Turkey summoned for one-man Koran protest)", *NOS Nieuws*, 24 February 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2461020-nederlandse-ambassadeur-in-turkije-op-het-matje-wegens-eenmans-koranprotest>.

21 "Turkije roept Nederland ter verantwoording na verscheuren koran (Turkey calls the Netherlands to account after tearing up the Koran)", *NOS Nieuws*, 21 August 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2487462-turkije-roept-nederland-ter-verantwoording-na-verscheuren-koran>.

22 Ibid.

23 Cyril Rosman, Cyril, "Veiligheidsdienst: 'Kans op aanslag in Nederland toegenomen door verscheuren koran' ("Security service: 'Risk of attack in the Netherlands increased due to tearing up of the Quran!)," *Het Parool*, 30 May, 2023, <https://www.parool.nl/nederland/veiligheidsdienst-kans-op-aanslag-in-nederland-toegenomen-door-verscheuren-koran~b1097214/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>.

24 "NCTV's Terrorist Threat Assessment 58: increased terrorist threat to the Netherlands", *NCTV*, 29 June 2023, <https://english.nctv.nl/latest/news/2023/06/29/nctvs-terrorist-threat-assessment-58-increased-terrorist-threat-to-the-netherlands>.



## Discussing the limitations of freedom of speech and freedom of association

In all cases addressed above, calls to curb the freedom of speech or the freedom of demonstration when it concerns the desecration of religious symbols were heard, most loudly in the MMS, but also by for instance local Islamic political parties. The position of Western states in the past years was rather to stress the importance of human rights as the fundament of a democratic society. Blasphemy laws were not enforced or had been abolished. Since criminal law is not applicable, the only other option is to take a precautionary measure by implementing an administrative measure in order to protect national security or public order. However the use of these measures is restricted by human rights law, and therefore several criteria need to be respected to legitimate a restriction of the freedom of speech and freedom of association.<sup>25</sup> The threshold for the rightful use of a restrictive measure in case of Quran desecrations or similar actions will therefore be extremely high.

The developments in Sweden and Denmark, and the policy responses considering using criminal law prohibitions or administrative restrictions regulating the freedom of demonstration are therefore remarkable, and questionable in light of the long-term European tradition of promotion of freedom of speech and freedom of association. The initiative for criminalisation in Denmark, which basically turns back the clock to pre-2017 when the blasphemy law was abolished, has triggered a response by Danish artists and intellectuals who qualify this step as “an attack on art, political expression and freedom of the press,” as well as on “free and democratic society.”<sup>26</sup> These responses can thus be questioned, certainly considering the fact that another approach that rather promotes outreach, exchanges and dialogue has proven to be effective.

## Lessons learned for an effective policy response

These recent events bring back memories of events of 10 to 15 years ago, when Islam-critical outings were also the reason for protests, threats, and even attacks in Europe.<sup>27</sup> In 2005, the publications of Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten caused serious threats against the artist and the newspaper.<sup>28</sup> Protests were organised in Denmark by Muslim organisations, and some of these organisations added other Islam-critical cartoons from other sources to the file presenting a total and even more insulting package as if they were all produced by Jyllands Posten, which they sent to MMS to further incite the growing protests in the Arab world. Consumer boycotts against Danish products were announced and had a serious impact on Danish exports. Protests by Muslim organisations in MMS further triggered counter-protests in the West when the MMS called for the curbing of freedom of speech. Kurt Westergaard survived the various attacks on his life, but publications of Islam critical cartoons in the French magazine Charlie Hebdo in 2015 resulted in violent murders of staff members at Charlie Hebdo in Paris. And five years later the showing of the disputed cartoon for educational purposes in a French classroom, indirectly led to the murder of the teacher Samuel Patty.

25 Tanya Mehra, Matthew Wentworth and Bibi van Ginkel, The Expanding Use of Administrative Measures in a Counter-Terrorism Context - Part 1: In Need of Rule of Law Safeguards, *ICCT Policy Brief*, 10 November 2021.

26 “Danish law banning public burning of Quran spurs outcry”, *Le Monde*, 25 September 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/25/in-denmark-outcry-against-law-banning-the-public-burning-of-the-quran\\_6139117\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/09/25/in-denmark-outcry-against-law-banning-the-public-burning-of-the-quran_6139117_4.html).

27 One of the author of this policy brief, Peter Knoope, was, at the time, behind the scenes involved in drafting the strategic communications campaign preparing for the potential fall out of the broadcasting of Fitna. The recommendations in this policy brief build on his recollection of the way events played out.

28 Pernille Ammitzbøll and Lorenzo Vidino, “After the Danish Cartoon Controversy,” *Middle East Forum*, 2007, <https://www.meforum.org/1437/after-the-danish-cartoon-controversy/>.

The publication of the so called ‘Danish Cartoons’ and the economic and security implications these had for Denmark led to an initiative, under the name ‘Cartoon Working Group’, coordinated by the Dutch National Coordinator for Counter Terrorism (NCTb), the predecessor of the Dutch National Coordinator on Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). The Dutch government instantly realised that similar national and international reactions could be harmful to a range of Dutch interests, including economic relations through calls for boycotts were anything like the Danish cartoons happen in the Netherlands. After all there were concerns that this could lead to human victims, very similar to what happened in the responses to the publication of the Danish cartoons.

This whole-government working group signalled and monitored events that could potentially lead to Danish cartoon like situations in the Netherlands. This working group developed the machinery and the preventative approaches that later played a pivotal role in the in the government responses to the release of the movie called ‘Fitna’.

Although protests occurred in the Netherlands in 2008 and security threat levels were raised after the announcement of the Islam-critical movie ‘Fitna’, ultimately, the protests in response to the release of ‘Fitna’ were not as fierce as anticipated due to the appeasing and mitigating measures taken by the Dutch government. Lessons learned from the approach in 2008 are worth revisiting in light of the current events.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, when the production of ‘Fitna’ was announced to the NCTb, the NCTb brought this fact to the attention of the existing ‘Cartoon Working Group’. The Dutch National Coordinator on Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) subsequently assigned the ‘Cartoon Working Group’ with the coordinating task to prepare for the responses to potential events due to the (announced) release of the movie. At the time of the creation of the coordinating mechanism, the idea, let alone the timing for the release of ‘Fitna’, was not known. The coordination mechanism included a range of actors from the intelligence agencies and the police to government ministries, including the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the main municipalities. One of the first action points after the creation of the Cartoon Working Group was a visit to Denmark to get briefed about the lessons learned from the events following the publication of the Danish cartoons. This exchange proved to be very fruitful.

It led first and foremost to the formulation of a clear position of the Dutch government in an early stage. The position stipulated the point of view of the government in relation to ‘Fitna’ that was to be communicated as a central message to all constituencies, be it national or international. The position of the Dutch government stated three key points. First, that the opinion of a Member of Parliament does not represent the point of view of the Dutch government. Second, freedom of speech is a pivotal value of the Dutch society so anybody has the right to express his/her vision. Third, there is no legal basis to prevent any publication beforehand. Finally, the product will be judged once released. The statement called for debate and exchange as a way to resolve differences. This position was pro-actively shared with relevant actors in Dutch cities and neighbourhoods, governments in MMS, relevant civil society actors worldwide, religious leaders, Ambassadors in the Netherlands of the OIC member states, and with multilateral organisations including EU and UN. The statement appeared on the agenda during international visits of cabinet ministers, of Ambassadorial meetings and visits, but also during conversations with interest groups within and beyond the Netherlands.

The visit to Denmark also led to the creation of channels for a daily update for the members of the Cartoon working Group with information on the ‘temperature’ within communities in the Netherlands and in relevant third States. The information was based on open-source

<sup>29</sup> “Samenvatting Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 14 (Summary Terrorism Threat Assessment Netherlands 14)”, NCTV, 9 September 2008, <https://www.nctv.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2008/09/09/samenvatting-dtn14>.

intelligence, information gathered by Dutch Embassies and on a well-developed network of community police officers. This network had been created in 2004 after the killing of Theo van Gogh, a Dutch cineaste who also produced an Islam-critical movie ‘Submission’. This network was useful to mitigate potential tensions and deal with misinformation and serve as an early warning mechanism. The outreach initiated by Dutch Embassies to relevant actors in the MMS saw bonds created with groups that would normally not have access to the Dutch Embassies – a positive outcome. Some long-lasting relations of Dutch diplomatic missions in the Middle East were built in this period.<sup>30</sup> The daily updates gave information about preparations that were under way for provocative or even violent responses to the release of the movie ‘Fitna’. It gave information about provocateurs that had plans to spin information to create unrest and call for militant action. Concerns about provocateurs could subsequently be raised with relevant actors to mitigate potential negative responses.

Meanwhile embassies and other Dutch interests abroad were asked to prepare for a potential fallout of the release of the movie. This was necessary also because neither the actual content nor the planning for the date or the medium for release were known to the NCTb or to other members of the ‘Cartoon Working Group’. This fact posed a problem because the NCTb was responsible for the safety and security of missions, vessels, and military personnel abroad, as well as for the security situation in Dutch cities, and most of all the personal safety of the producers of the movie. Crucial information was lacking to be able to adequately protect them and their direct environment. In order to best prepare with the limited information available, several imaginary scripts and scenarios were developed.<sup>31</sup> Strict coordination and real time sharing of data and information proved to be most crucial under these circumstances.

The Dutch authorities also reached out to those who initiated and produced the movie to be informed about planning of the release and the exact content of the film. Unfortunately, this information was only provided at the very last moment. The suspense that was created by this lack of adequate information added to the national and international tension. The press was keen to publish articles and analyses with a wide variety of predictions. The national and international attention was coming to a peak in the weeks before the actual release. This was an effect that the producers may have been looking for, but that hindered an adequate preparation of potential fallout. There are critics that claim that the intensified preparation for the release of the movie provoked this effect. There is certainly some truth in this criticism. It is complex, however, to estimate and judge what would have happened in the absence of adequate preparation and well organised information flows. After all, very little happened after the release of the movie once ‘Fitna’ went public. Although the terrorism risk level was formally raised from limited to substantial in relation to the potential events, the reaction, both nationally and internationally, was very limited if not zero.

This well managed response was to a large extent also due to the Muslim communities in the Netherlands itself. Contacts between those communities and the Dutch government on different levels led to the explicit position of the leaders in the communities that there was no reason for a negative or agitated response to the movie ‘Fitna’, whatever the content would be. On the basis of several attempts to reach out to these communities, and a speech of the Prime Minister in which he declared that freedom of speech does not imply the right to insult any specific group

30 Speech of the Ambassador of the Netherlands, Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, on the occasion of a dialogue with Islamic Parties and Organisations at the Muhammadiyah Head Quarters on the film Fitna, Jakarta, 7 April 2008, [https://www.academia.edu/3845581/Speech\\_of\\_the\\_Ambassador\\_of\\_the\\_Netherlands\\_Dr\\_Nikolaos\\_van\\_Dam\\_on\\_the\\_occasion\\_of\\_a\\_dialogue\\_with\\_Islamic](https://www.academia.edu/3845581/Speech_of_the_Ambassador_of_the_Netherlands_Dr_Nikolaos_van_Dam_on_the_occasion_of_a_dialogue_with_Islamic)

31 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, ‘Achtste Voortgangsrapportage Terrorismebestrijding (Eighth Progress Report on Counterterrorism)’, Kamerstukken 29754, nr. 131, 9 juni 2008, Terrorismebestrijding | Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal.

in society, the leaders decided to support the position of the Dutch government. That support proved a game changer. Also, leaders of Muslim communities in the Netherlands reached out to actors in MMS - a message which received a positive response. This outreach likely had a greater impact than the outreach to multilateral fora, and the fact that the European Parliament tried to block the showing of 'Fitna'.<sup>32</sup> Dutch Muslim organisations were of the opinion that there was sufficient room for discussion in the Netherlands, and that the freedom of speech for critics of the Islam was equally guaranteed for themselves - a guarantee that they would not want to do without.

Questions might arise regarding the relevance of the response of the Dutch government to the announcement of the release of 'Fitna' to the series of apparently relatively limited manifestations of Quran desecrations in Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands now. We argue it is for several reasons. Firstly, the release of 'Fitna' was also just one person's action which in no way led to growing support and subsequent public manifestations of anti-Islamic groups. Also 'Fitna' the movie was, certainly in hindsight, hardly extremely provocative in its nature and content. The current actions in Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands are also acts by individuals and potentially more provocative in nature. On top of that, the initial responses in the MMS are also similar. The fact that we are currently seeing a sequence of more one-man actions has not changed that.

## Recommendations

The experience and the lessons learned during the preparation of the potential fallout of 'Fitna' leads to several recommendations for governments, especially national coordinating security agencies that should certainly include the Ministries of Foreign Affairs.

In the preparation phase:

1. Set up a so-called permanent 'Cartoon Working Group' initiative comparable to the working group created in 2015 in the Netherlands and the European Union to prepare for 'Danish-cartoon-like-situations'.
2. Establish this strong coordinating structure, which represents a whole-government approach, with the potential to reach out to communities and representatives of minorities as well as international players.
3. Invite the EU to task the European Radicalisation Awareness Network to create a whole-government response mechanism to potentially polarising situations.
4. Organise a constant information flow that informs decision-taking. This information flow is not necessarily limited to open-source information. Conditions to share confidential information must be secured.

In the response phase:

5. Formulate one message that is conveyed to all constituencies. Repetition and uniformity is key. There cannot be two different messages regarding the same issue. There is very little or no room for personnel interpretation or additions.
6. Disseminate this centrally coordinated message in all directions within the country, but also

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<sup>32</sup> "European Parliament bans anti-Islam film Fitna", *Expatica*, 18 December 2008, <https://www.expatica.com/be/general/european-parliament-bans-anti-islam-film-fitna-76997/>.

abroad. Send all Ambassadors on a mission to reach out to governments, Muslim leaders and influential clergy.

7. Identify the provocateurs anywhere in the world. Those who are spinning the information, using fake news, etc. with the aim to spur unrest and those that call for militant action. Respond to those provocateurs in a composed manner. Consult with relevant governments to create shared responsibility and create partnerships in curbing provocations.

8. Reach out to Ambassadors of especially MMS missions in the country where the desecrations take place, to explain the government's position. After all that is where they are there for.

9. Reach out to Muslim communities at home and abroad. Guarantee their representation of majority and minority points of view. Do not hesitate to encourage Muslim communities to also reach out to Muslim communities abroad, and to engage within the community with an invitation for an open dialogue.

10. Prepare scenarios and scripts. There are always unpredictable elements. Take these into account as much as possible. Be prepared, just in case.

In the case of 'Fitna' the threats, demonstrations and violence in the aftermath were much less serious than anticipated. Nothing that even remotely compares to the response to the Danish cartoons happened. It is very hard to judge whether that was the result of the preparations. After all, this is also the perfect example of the prevention paradox where we will never know what would have happened if the preparations would not have been as extensive as they were. Nevertheless, other incidents with Islam-critical outings that followed have once again shown what the fall out could look like as well, just as the current situation shows with the Quran desecrations in Scandinavia and the Netherlands again.

There were furthermore some very important side effects. The bonds created during the 'Fitna' period were lasting. The image of the Dutch was turned in a positive direction. The Dutch showed their commitment to problem solving and prevention. The difference with reactions from other European governments was noticed.

But there are surely those who feel that all the preparations gave too much attention to 'Fitna' and its creator. That is certainly also an element to take into account. The question is whether the positive impact and the advantages of the approach that was chosen weigh up to the disadvantage of giving attention to a provocative voice. All in all, we think it is a pitfall to think that a society can afford to ignore provocation in order not to fuel it with attention. Provocation cries for attention and will only get more attention in this age dominated by social media. There is not much sense denying it, and so the strategy propagated by some not to pay attention to these provocations, so it will not get any oxygen, is no longer a viable one. On the contrary, it is crucially important with these kind of sensitive issues to be in full control when it comes to (violent or militant) reactions to a provocation. Because if you don't make an effort to control the narrative, the narrative will control you. Since the start of the conflict between Israel and Hamas on the 7th of October 2023, this is even more true. Tensions have been rising in various communities around the world. The risks that even at the outset small events trigger lone actors or even large-scale counterreactions, including violence, are even higher now. Understanding the sentiments and grievances on all sides, while ensuring safety and security and respect for freedom of expression is a major task for governments worldwide. Ensuring they also communicate that in a strategic manner is an even bigger challenge.

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### **Bibi van Ginkel**

Dr. Bibi van Ginkel, LL.M. is the Programme Lead of the Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) pillar of ICCT and Senior Research fellow. Her expertise spans a wide variety of focus areas of ICCT, from rule of law issues to trends and threat developments, counterterrorism, countering violent extremism responses, and prevention strategies, and the nexus between development and PCVE. She has published on these topics, as well as provided policy advice and training. In the PCVE pillar, she focuses on strengthening multi-stakeholder and multi-disciplinary approaches, ensuring global, national and local approaches are connected, using a human security lens to assess impact of policies and mitigate challenges, and advising on context-specific and effective policy solutions. She is a strong advocate of monitoring and evaluation of policies based on well-developed theory of changes, and has conducted evaluations of the CT policies of the EU, the co-chairmanship of The Netherlands of the GCTF, and the cooperation between the UN and the GCTF. Some examples of research and policy advice include themes such as returning foreign fighters, right-wing and anti-establishment extremism, evidence collection on the battlefield, use of administrative measures in a counter-terrorism context, the do no harm principle as a guiding principle in CT and PCVE policy-making, assessment of local responses to radicalisation and extremism, development of multi-stakeholder PCVE policies.

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Peter Knoope is a Distinguished Fellow at ICCT following his departure as Director in August 2014. Until mid 2009, he was Deputy Director of the Policy and Strategy Department of the Dutch National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism (NCTb). The NCTb was established in 2005, following the terrorist attacks in Madrid of 11 March 2004 and the killing of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, and is responsible for the development and coordination of the government wide counter-terrorism strategy in the Netherlands. He was involved in the development of the NCTb from its inception and was responsible for the coordination between the Dutch government's national and international counter-terrorism policy.

He is a career diplomat who has inter alia been posted as Head of Mission to Afghanistan. Prior to this posting, he headed the Humanitarian Aid section at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he was responsible for the Dutch response to foreign crisis situations. Before taking up his position at the Humanitarian Aid section, he was spokesperson for the Minister for Development Cooperation. He has also worked in development cooperation and research programmes in Tanzania, Cameroon and Senegal.





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