

Netherlands: Geert Wilders releases his anti-Islamic film

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The decision of right-wing Dutch MP Geert Wilders to screen a short film claiming that the Koran is a “fascist” book is yet another effort to stir up anti-Islamic sentiment and promote a climate of fear. It follows the reprinting of the caricature of the Prophet Mohammed in 17 newspapers in Denmark on February 13.

Wilders’ film is entitled *Fitna*, an Arabic word meaning strife or discord that represents a test of faith. It asserts a Koranic inspiration for modern terror attacks including 9/11 and the July 7 London bombings. Suras written centuries ago are claimed to be the historical justification not only for such attacks, but also for anti-Semitism and plots to both rule and Islamise the world.

The closing sequences assert that the Netherlands is being swamped by Islamic immigrants and will eventually be subject to Sharia Law, including capital punishment for gay men and adulterous women, as well as female genital mutilation and child abuse. It ends by equating Islam with fascism and the Stalinist dictatorship.

Dutch television networks would not screen the film, which forced Wilders to turn to the Internet. His own service provider suspended his web site while it investigates complaints regarding the site’s content, and the film was posted March 27 on the Liveleak video sharing web site, but taken down the following day due to threats to its staff.

In 2006, Wilders was one of the first to reprint the anti-Mohammed cartoons published by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, when he put them on his web site in early February, commenting that he wanted to show his solidarity with those defending “free speech.”

Far from being concerned with the right of everyone to express their opinions, he seeks to demonise an entire religion and all who believe in it. Formerly a member of the right-wing Liberal Party (VVD), he left in 2004 after a dispute over the right of Turkey to enter the European Union. Wilders vehemently opposed this, claiming that such a large country with a majority Muslim population would destabilise Europe. He remained in parliament, and in 2006, he founded the right-wing Party for Freedom (PVV).

At the time of the murder of Dutch film director Theo van Gogh in November 2004 by an Islamic fundamentalist, Wilders refused to attend parliament for some weeks, citing security fears and claiming he had received death threats for his outspoken defence of Van Gogh’s film depicting verses from the Koran on the bodies of naked women. Wilders also called for laws to allow the

authorities to immediately deport Muslims who were under surveillance and advocated a five-year ban on immigration from Islamic countries such as Turkey and Morocco.

In 2005, Wilders spearheaded a proposal to adopt Administrative Detention laws similar to those in place in Israel. This process, whereby individuals can be placed in detention without a trial, has been heavily criticised by human rights groups. Wilders is a closely identified with support for Zionism and the state of Israel, whose leaders such as Ariel Sharon he has visited frequently.

He has recently called for the suspension of the Dutch Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights to protect Dutch citizens from “Islamic fundamentalists.” In a revealing indication of how far Dutch politics has lurched rightwards, he was named politician of the year in December 2007 by NOS radio in a poll, which involved newspaper editors making the final decision.

Wilders’ efforts to scapegoat Muslims as a threat to democracy and a drain on society—and those made more broadly within ruling circles—are bound up with the sharp social polarisation within the Netherlands. Once equated with a relatively high degree of equality and prosperity, by 2004 a growing number of people in the Netherlands were being made to suffer as a result of the right-wing trajectory of the ruling parties, including the nominally “left” Social Democrats (PvDA). The so-called “Polder model” implemented by the Dutch government from the 1980s onwards saw massive attacks on the living standards of the working class, with major cuts in public spending, wage freezes and job losses, coupled with a vast enrichment of those at the top of society. In order to sow divisions in the working class, the 1 million-strong immigrant population, mostly from North Africa, was targeted.

New asylum-seekers were now to be admitted only if they could afford €6,600 for a language and integration course. The right to bring in family members and spouses was severely curtailed. All immigrants were to be deported by special military detachments. Following Van Gogh’s murder, this was accompanied by a campaign of “forced assimilation,” insisting that immigrants must accept “Dutch values and culture” and government spokesmen “declaring war” on Islamic fundamentalism. There were weeks of indiscriminate attacks on mosques and other Muslim properties by extreme right-wing groups.

Wilders couples his own virulent anti-immigrant chauvinism with pledges to launch sweeping cuts on welfare provisions for working people.

Following *Fitna*'s release, the Dutch Security Services advised the threat of a terrorist attack on the Netherlands to "substantial." Whilst not having any evidence or intelligence of any planned attacks and with the response internationally being described as "surprisingly muted," this move is designed to create a mood of ever-greater fear among the general population—which will be exploited by right-wing forces to demand strong measures against any opposition from Muslims or the wider population to Wilders' provocative documentary.

The Taliban has called Wilders' provocations and the republication of the cartoons in Denmark part of a "crusader war" against the Muslim world and threatened direct attacks on the 1,600 Dutch troops currently stationed in Afghanistan. This has been the primary objection to airing the film from many in the ruling establishment in the Netherlands. NATO Secretary General Jaap De Hoop explained that he felt the release of the film would put Dutch troops in greater danger.

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende also made clear that his main concern was the dangers to Dutch interests in Islamic countries when he stated, "Already we have to consider there are serious risks for Dutch nationals and Dutch businesses in several countries. It is our duty to point this out to Mr. Wilders."

French President Nicolas Sarkozy was quick to seek to capitalise on events. He officially declared his support for the Dutch government in opposing the film while adding that France would come to the aid of the Netherlands if it faced violent protest. Spokesman David Martinon said that Sarkozy had reiterated to Balkenende his proposal to create a fund to help protect European citizens threatened by extremists.

There are also those who have come to Wilders' support, supposedly due to a commitment to free speech.

The right-wing Czech National Party offered Wilders a platform to screen his film on its web site.

In an interview with *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Flemming Rose, the cultural editor of *Jyllands-Posten*, denounced efforts to censor Wilders' movie. He dismissed all criticism of the content of Wilders' film—which he described as a piece of propaganda comparable to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*—as irrelevant to the central task of defending "free speech and open debate." But in the end, he came out in defence of the *content* of the film, insisting that "Wilders didn't make up things. I just think he didn't strike the right balance... Yes, he is painting a very simplistic picture of Muslims. But it is also a fact of life that a lot of violence is being committed in the name of Islam. And that is what he shows in this film."

Also backing Wilder behind professions of a concern for free speech were Peter Hoekstra in the *Wall Street Journal* and Paul Belien in the *Washington Times*. Belien rails against the "appeasement of Islam" by the Western media and compares it to the manner in which European newspapers concealed the danger of Nazi invasion and censored "everything that resembled what today might be called 'Naziphobia.'"

In truth, it is Wilder's film that has the character of Nazi-style propaganda.

A Dutch entertainment mogul and leading representative of the foundation "Another Jewish voice" pointed this out in a full-page

advertisement in the *Volkskrant* newspaper, stating, "If Wilders said the same about Jews and the Old Testament as he does about Muslims (and the Koran) he would have been long picked up and sentenced for anti-Semitism." In an accompanying interview, he compared Wilders' approach to Islam to the build-up of anti-Jewish sentiment before World War II. "I see no difference between a skull-cap and a headscarf.... I hope we get support from across the Jewish community because they should recognise this like no one else."

The Netherlands' Central Jewish Board said that while the anti-Semitic material Wilders compiled "demonstrates some Muslims have terrible ideas about Jews," the way *Fitna* portrays reality serves to "polarise Dutch society."

Kurt Westergaard, the artist behind one of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, originally came out in defence of Wilders. He has now expressed concerns because his cartoon is used in the film without his permission and stated that it was aimed against Islamic terrorists, not against Islam as a religion.

Those accused of the murder plot to kill Westergaard, which triggered the republication in February of the Mohammed caricatures, have been remanded in custody until they are deported. While one Danish citizen was released soon after being arrested in February due to lack of evidence, the two Tunisian nationals, who have been resident in Denmark for more than seven years, have been held without access to the charges against them and have not been accorded the right of a hearing in front of an independent judge. On March 12, a Copenhagen court ruled that under Danish Terrorism laws, the two could be held until they are deported.

The lawyer for one of the accused has demanded that his client and the other accused should be given a hearing in the Danish Supreme Court. "An expulsion without trial is a violation of the [European] human rights convention, and the same goes for the police decision to keep the motivation for the expulsion secret," he said. He also noted that deporting both of the accused back to Tunisia would put them in serious danger of torture.



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