

Three killed, five injured in Netherlands shooting

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19 March 2019

Dutch officials announced at 6:30 p.m. last night that police had arrested 37-year-old Gökmen Tanis, the principal suspect in a shooting yesterday morning in the city of Utrecht that left three people dead and another five injured.

At the time of writing, little is known about either the event itself or the motivations of the shooter. The shooting occurred on a tram in Utrecht at approximately 10:45 a.m. Witness statements indicate that a single male shooter was targeting a specific woman, rather than firing indiscriminately at all nearby passengers.

A 21-year-old witness, Niels, who was on the tram at the time, told *De Gelderlander* that the perpetrator “focused on a particular person,” and then “aimed at the people who tried to help that woman.” He said that he saw a woman crawl out of the tram, and as people tried to help her, a gunman “went round behind her and began firing at them.”

Another witness told Dutch public broadcaster NOS that he helped an injured woman after the tram had stopped. “I looked behind me and saw someone lying there behind the tram. People got out of their cars ... and they started to lift her up. I helped to pull her out and then I saw a gunman run towards us, with his gun raised,” he said. “I heard people yell: Shooter! Shooter! And I started to run.” Of the five people injured, three are reported to be in critical condition.

The Turkish state-owned news agency Anadolu reported that the shooter was targeting “a relative in a tram due to a family dispute,” citing unnamed relatives. Tanis is reportedly of Turkish origin.

NOS reported that acquaintances told the media that there was a “family issue,” and that Tanis had serious psychological problems. The French-language Internaute website reported that “multiple witnesses

described Tanis as an unstable individual, in particular since a separation one or two years ago.”

Police have also confirmed that Tanis was known to them and had a criminal record. He reportedly attended pre-trial hearings two weeks ago on rape charges dating from July 2017, and faced trial in 2013 on attempted homicide charges relating to a shooting in a flat in Kanaleneiland, near where yesterday’s shooting took place. NOS reported that he had also faced court action for a number of petty offences, including burglary in 2012, shoplifting and driving under the influence of alcohol in 2014, and damage to property in 2015.

A local businessman told BBC Turkish that Tanis had fought in the Russian republic of Chechnya. “He was arrested because of his connections with [IS] but released later,” the businessman claimed.

More substantive information making clear the character of the shooting will doubtless come to light as the investigation proceeds. Well before it was clear what had occurred, however, the Dutch and other European governments yesterday were already whipping up an atmosphere of national emergency and issuing thinly-veiled references to terrorism and religious extremism.

Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the head of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, spoke at a press conference in the afternoon. Rutte declared that “a terrorist motive has not been ruled out,” adding, “An act of terror is an attack on our civilization, on our open and tolerant society.”

If it was confirmed as a terrorist act, he said, the only answer was that “our society, our democracy, is stronger than fanaticism and violence. We will not yield to intolerance.” The references to “our civilization” and an “open and tolerant society” are typical dog-whistle references used for xenophobic

attacks on immigrants and Muslims.

Rutte was joined by French President Emmanuel Macron, who tweeted, “We are at your side in grief and determination to fight against those who wish to impose terror.”

These statements were made as police announced that the gunman had fled the scene of the shooting and that a manhunt was underway. The government raised the national threat rating to the highest level for Utrecht, advising all residents in the city to remain indoors. Videos on social media show heavily-armed police conducting building-by-building searches for Tanis.

In recent years, the entire political establishment in the Netherlands has shifted ever further to the right and more and more openly adopted anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies. Both the People’s Party and the Socialist Party have increasingly adopted the policies of Geert Wilders’s neo-fascistic Party for Freedom (PVV).

In the run-up to the last elections in March 2017, Rutte’s government blocked two Turkish ministers from speaking at events in the Netherlands to campaign for a “yes” vote among Turks on Erdogan’s constitutional referendum to transfer far-reaching powers to the presidency. Rutte’s decision was praised by Wilders as a victory for the PVV, declaring: “We do not want more but less Islam. So Turkey, stay away from us. You are not welcome here.”

The Socialist Party supported Rutte’s ban. The lead candidate Emile Roemer declared that there was “no place in the Netherlands for the propaganda circus of sultan Erdogan.” Yesterday’s shooting took place in the lead-up to nationwide provincial elections scheduled for March 20.

The promotion of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism by the Dutch political establishment is part of an international shift to the right within the ruling class and the deliberate promotion of extreme-right forces by the state and their elevation into positions of power, in response to growing struggles of the working class against inequality and growing interest in socialism.

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