



# Salafism in the Netherlands: Diversity and dynamics

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## Introduction

The ongoing crises in the Middle East and North Africa have not only disrupted those regions, they have also affected the transnational religious domain. Relations between populations and faiths are under pressure as a result of wars, refugee flows and politico-religiously motivated radicalism and terrorism. This is translating into increasing tensions within Western societies. As a consequence, Salafism is currently gaining renewed attention from politicians, the public and the media. The framework defining the Dutch government's approach to this movement on home soil was last set out in 2010.<sup>1</sup> Since then, both the external context and the internal dynamics of Salafism have changed. The question now, then, is how much that framework is still relevant and useful in the light of more recent developments. To answer that, this publication outlines the current state of Salafism in the Netherlands.

## Salafism as a spectrum

Salafism is a collective term for a spectrum of fundamentalist currents within Sunni Islam, all pursuing what they regard as the “pure” version of the faith. They share the same methods and largely agree on key points of doctrine and worship. Within the broad spectrum of Salafism, however, there are also clear differences in the interpretation of dogma and its translation into specific political, social and behavioural precepts.

The modern currents in Salafism have their origins on the Arabian Peninsula. Since the 1970s, various nations in that region have been very active in spreading their particular visions of Islam to the West. Salafist missionary work (da'wa) has been conducted through charitable foundations, schools and mosques, and by means of proselytising materials designed for the international “market”. There are also intensive contacts between adherents in different countries, so that events in the Middle East often have an immediate impact upon the Salafist movement in Western nations. These links are maintained through the supply – to an increasing extent online – of recruitment and teaching materials, the financing of foundations and mosques, the exchange of imams and sheikhs and the facilitation of religious study abroad.

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<sup>1</sup> Salafism in the Netherlands, government memorandum to the Netherlands House of Representatives, dd. 12 December 2009 (29 924, no. 45). For previous analyses, see, for example, [Salafism in the Netherlands – A passing phenomenon or a persistent factor of significance?](#) (NCTb, 2008) and [Resilience and Resistance – Current trends and developments in Salafism in the Netherlands](#) (AIVD, 2009).

“Salafism” is often equated with “orthodox Islam”, but in fact the movement rejects the Muslim religious traditions and schools of jurisprudence which have developed over many centuries – and hence Islamic orthodoxy. In reverting to an idealised Islamic past based upon a literal interpretation of religious source texts, Salafism is actually fundamentalist in nature. Moreover, this is a spectrum which makes an exclusive claim to authenticity: it, and it alone, represents “pure” or “true” Islam. The focus is upon the “re-education” of Muslims and of society in general and upon “cleansing” the faith of perceived “modernism” and – the greatest enemy – “heresy”. This quest can result in adherents isolating themselves socially from the outside world, adopting a lifestyle which gives them a sense of identity and group solidarity whilst at the same time providing an opportunity to make a very personal contribution to what they view as a higher goal.

Within the Salafist spectrum, we can discern three general strands. At the root of the differences are their position in regard to the regimes in power in Muslim majority countries.

1. *Apolitical Salafism* is characterised by an abhorrence of chaos, division and revolution, instead emphasising personal religious experience and isolation from non-Muslim society. Its primary means of propagating a “pure” Islamic society are “dawah” (proselytising the “call to Islam”) and setting a “good example”.
2. *Political Salafism*, by contrast, advocates greater involvement in society and so is more politically engaged. It actively pursues religiously inspired political and social objectives, predominantly through dawah.
3. *Jihadi Salafism* is the most extreme form. As one of the principal ingredients in the mix constituting the violent jihadism we see in the world today, its defining characteristics are the denunciation of “apostates” (“takfir”) and the endorsement of violence – although, it has to be said, the exact interpretation of both is the subject of much discussion within the movement.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, jihadi Salafists also regularly engage in dawah.

There is thus an important distinction to be drawn between jihadi Salafism, with its approval of violence, and the essentially non-violent apolitical and political strands.

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<sup>2</sup> [Global Jihadism: Analysis of the phenomenon and reflections on radicalisation](#) (NCTV, 2014).

Although there are clear similarities in Salafism in terms of their core doctrine and practices, there are also obvious differences. The quest for a “pure” Islam is the source of fierce internal debate, even among adherents of the same strand. There is no central authority. Source texts are interpreted in different ways, and different conclusions are drawn from them. The specific goals being pursued can vary widely, too, as can the means deemed justifiable to achieve them. At the practical level, attitudes towards the democratic system differ substantially, as do positions in respect of the Arab regimes and opinions concerning political and social engagement in non-Muslim countries like the Netherlands. In common with other religions and religious movements, Salafism has its extremists.

The Salafist spectrum is part of Sunni Islam, and it can sometimes be difficult to tell where exactly the boundary between Salafism and orthodox Sunnism lies. Many Salafists do not identify themselves as such, instead preferring “pure Muslim” or simply “Muslim”. Not only can this help them reach a broader Muslim audience, it may also give outsiders the impression that their influence extends further than their own narrow support base. Adherents play a wide variety of roles within the movement, from individual follower to teacher and preacher, but have no defined responsibilities; in any of these roles, a person may be reflective or demonstrative, persuasive or even forceful. And they may be so in private or public, and more or less active. Even the influence of acknowledged scholars can fluctuate, so there is no guarantee that the faithful will share or adopt their opinions. Salafist preachers and mosques often – for practical reasons – attract wider, non-Salafist audiences or congregations. Just because a person attends a Salafist conference or mosque does not necessarily make them a Salafist. Let alone radical.

The absence of a central authority and the differences of opinion concerning the practical application of doctrine in the contemporary context are at the root of fragmentation within the Salafist spectrum. As well as interpretational divergence, moreover, there are also ruptures brought about by strategic considerations, pragmatism or opportunism. Standpoints are sometimes ambiguous or even contradictory, and can change according to the context they are being aired in. This means that the above categorisation of three distinct strands is primarily a conceptual model; in practice, the dividing lines between the various forms of Salafism are far from straightforward, certainly for outsiders.

## The Salafist movement in the Netherlands today

The Salafist movement is a minority strand within Sunni Islam in the Netherlands. Given its diversity and the diffuse boundaries already described, it is impossible to calculate exactly how many followers it has. Salafist missionary work has been under way in our country since the 1980s, through mosques, educational and welfare foundations and so on. The movement is professional in its communication activities: a large proportion of the information about Islam available to the Dutch public, especially online, reflects a Salafist world view. This helps to explain the popularity of Salafi ideas among young Dutch Muslims and converts, in particular. The movement uses a very wide range of media to reach a transnational audience: not just the internet and social media, but also satellite television, conferences and courses featuring prominent guest preachers. All are designed to disseminate Salafist ideology as widely as possible and to attract potential new adherents.

The Salafist movement in the Netherlands is organised to a limited extent, with structures representing its political and its apolitical strands. As well as controlling their own places of worship and charitable foundations, these currents also exert influence within the administrative bodies of other mosques. Close contacts between sections of the movement here in the Netherlands and Salafist individuals and structures in the Middle East potentially give those external players an (undesirable) level of influence over parts of the Dutch spectrum. Missionary work and mobilisation activities also take place outside the established “Salafist centres”. Moreover, many of those who attend Salafist lectures and sermons do not confine their religious loyalties to a single mosque or preacher. As well as centres with a more or less “official” identity, there are also “independent” preachers who organise meetings throughout the country, mainly aimed at young people. There is a huge amount of material available on the internet, too. Meanwhile, the jihadi Salafist strand, operates outside these formal structures. Thus, on the organisational level the Salafist spectrum is also very diverse.

Some years ago, the AIVD found that the growth of Salafism in the Netherlands was stagnating. In 2009 the service reported that Salafist mosques, although propagating an intolerant, isolationist and antidemocratic message, were no longer functioning as a breeding ground for jihadist terrorism. Under the combined pressure of public debate, government policy and opposition from within Muslim communities, they were actively excluding extremists and rejecting extremism. The potential downside to this development, however was the possibility of jihadists unable to attend mosques instead turning to an alternative preaching circuit or the internet.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [Resilience and Resistance – Current trends and developments in Salafism in the Netherlands](#) (AIVD, 2009).

Since this conclusion was drawn, the national and international context and the internal dynamics of the Salafist movement have changed considerably. In 2014 the AIVD reported that Salafism was again on the rise in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

**Externally**, international developments are playing a major role. The internal dynamism of the Dutch Salafist spectrum is in part determined by such factors as the war in Syria and the increased political instability in the Middle East. The proclamation of the so-called “Caliphate” by ISIS in 2014 may well have catalysed greater receptiveness to Salafist ideology among some young Muslims. Conflicts in the region – especially the increasing tensions along the dividing line between the Sunni and Shi’ite spheres of influence – seem to be encouraging more missionary work in the West. Political Salafism, in particular, is exploiting the widely felt concern about what is happening in the Middle East.

By addressing current political issues, and placing them in a religious framework, some Salafist preachers are encouraging young Dutch Muslims to engage more strongly – socially, politically and religiously – with the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. When such efforts are coupled with vilification and excommunication of those holding different beliefs, such as Shi’ites and Jews, they can foster intolerance and undermine the democratic legal order, and even constitute criminal acts if they incite hatred or violence.

Not only have these international developments affected the way Salafism manifests itself in the Netherlands, they have also changed the way Dutch society in general views the phenomenon. From 2009 onwards there was something of a decline in interest, but events in Syria and Iraq – and especially cases of Dutch citizens travelling to the region to join the armed struggle there – have once again raised concerns about jihadism at home. In this light, there is also renewed interest in Salafism as a potential breeding ground for radicalisation.

Salafist conferences, sermons and the financial support of mosques often raise questions within society about the movement’s relationship with jihadism. Sometimes, however, the “Salafism” cited in these discussions is a version reduced to its most extreme form. Moreover, some people within the general public seem to equate Salafism with orthodox

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 4 of the report [The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands – Swarm dynamics and new strength](#) (AIVD, 2014) and the [AIVD Annual Report 2014](#).



Islam, or even Islam in general. Such images can increase polarisation between different communities.

This changing national context has had a number of repercussions for the **internal dynamics** of the Salafist spectrum in the Netherlands. Since 2009, the predicted “alternative circuit” has indeed emerged. The movement is now more “networked” than it ever has been, with the internet and independent preachers playing a more prominent role. In a polarised climate, self-confident young sermonisers are more actively seeking the spotlight by making statements deliberately designed to probe the boundaries of what is acceptable to society, the state and the law.<sup>5</sup> And that can clear the way for radicalisation. The AIVD has recently noted that Salafists and jihadists are appearing at the same locations more than they used to.<sup>6</sup> It is also important to realise that, in a way, the Salafist movement plays a “liberating” role for some young Muslims. They very quickly adopt some of its more appealing and obvious ideological elements – the lifestyle, the group identity, the renunciation of Western society, the rejection of democracy – without immersing themselves in the many doctrinal and practical points of contention dividing up the Salafist spectrum. Especially when preachers do not speak out explicitly against participation in the armed struggle, this could possibly lead such youngsters to embrace jihadism more easily.

Since 2009 the Salafist ‘establishment’ seems to have been allowing itself more room to explore the boundaries set by the Dutch government. In 2014 the AIVD reported a certain ambivalence on the part of its leaders with regard to the armed struggle in Syria.<sup>7</sup> Again, such attitudes could undermine efforts to counter radicalisation. Moreover, clear examples of intolerance, intolerant isolationism and undemocratic activities have been observed recently and there is concern that these are not isolated incidents but reflections of more widely held sentiments.

A number of Salafist centres are sufficiently well-organised and financed to be able to expand their influence. This is reflected in, for example, the increasing range of educational activities being offered through Salafist welfare organisations. Concerns have also been raised about reports of mosques at which Salafist factions, often young, have gained greater influence within management boards.

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<sup>5</sup> For these boundaries, see “Protecting the democratic legal order” below.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 of the report [The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands – Swarm dynamics and new strength](#) (AIVD, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 4 of the report [The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands – Swarm dynamics and new strength](#) (AIVD, 2014).

*Recent examples of intolerance, intolerant isolationism and undemocratic activities*

- A young preacher urging his online followers not to vote in local elections because they are “idolatrous”.
- A Salafist leader equating Muslims who support the “Je suis Charlie” campaign on Facebook with heretics.
- A conference with invited foreign preachers who, in online sermons, have called for the repudiation of Jews and Shi’ites.
- A “foundation for Islamic education” proclaiming that, “In the Netherlands children are taught that everyone is equal – Muslims, Jews and Christians. Islam teaches us the opposite.”

Invitations to foreign preachers and other guests to speak at Dutch mosques have been a regular source of controversy in the Netherlands. Some visits have been criticised by local governments and the media, as indeed have appearances by certain, Dutch and other foreign preachers, who do not require a visa. The commotion they cause, is rarely a reason in itself for mosques to withdraw such invitations. For young, self-confident, independent, Dutch-speaking preachers, a possible public outcry is no reason whatsoever to hold back. Adopting an activist stance and literally speaking the same language as their young audiences, controversy alone will not make them moderate their message. What they demand are clear legal boundaries.

## Protecting the democratic legal order

In 2010 the government described its approach to the Salafist movement in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> Two key principles underlie the governmental approach towards any religious group or current active in Dutch society: constitutional rights and freedoms apply to all and the state is neutral in matters of religion. This means that it is not up to the government to decide what religious views are right or wrong, or whether anyone holds the monopoly on divine truths. The Constitution states that citizens are free to profess their religion or belief, whatever that may be. This includes beliefs generally regarded as orthodox or even fundamentalist.

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<sup>8</sup> Salafism in the Netherlands, government memorandum to the Netherlands House of Representatives, dd. 12 December 2009 (29 924, no. 45).

However this changes when religious or ideological beliefs serve as a basis for turning against the democratic legal order and established human rights. It becomes even more problematic when religious or ideological beliefs lead to the pursuit of antidemocratic goals by using undemocratic means. By *antidemocratic goals* we mean, for example, promoting a political system in which some sections of the population have fewer rights than others. *Undemocratic means* include:

- the use of violence;
- inciting hatred and discrimination against people with different faiths and beliefs;
- promoting hostile and fear-inducing stereotypes;
- the use of intimidation and psychological pressure;
- systematically disrupting and undermining of democratic institutions;
- rejecting state authority and trying to impose an alternative legal system instead;
- making clandestine efforts to influence democratic decision-making processes.

In a vigorous democracy, there should be room for political or religious individuals and groups, critical of the established system. Citizens have every right to aspire to their ideal of what they regard as a better legal order. But in doing so they are still bound by the structures, the institutions and the laws of the existing democratic polity. They are free to believe and convey that there is a better way, but the boundary of that freedom is reached when, in practice, the articulation of their beliefs disrupts or undermines the democratic system. Even if no actual laws are broken, the democratic legal order in its broadest sense can be threatened by individuals pursuing an antidemocratic political agenda by undemocratic means. When democratic interests are endangered in this way, it is up to the government and civil society – each in its own way, and within the framework of the Constitution – to show resilience.<sup>9</sup> In this context, antidemocratic and undemocratic tendencies should not be viewed merely, or not even mainly, as a security issue.

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<sup>9</sup> For descriptions of “democratic interests”, see the AIVD publications [From Dawah to Jihad – How radical Islam threatens the democratic legal order](#) (2004, pp. 10-15) and [The Radical Dawa in Transition – The rise of Islamic neoradicalism in the Netherlands](#) (2007, pp. 59-62).

In determining whether or not intervention is required of governmental authorities, all antidemocratic and undemocratic tendencies, whether religiously, politically or ideologically motivated, are judged using the same assessment criteria.

These are founded upon two basic principles:

- constitutional rights and freedoms apply equally to all; and
- the state is neutral in matters of religion.

The state does have a role to play when:

1. the law is broken;
2. the proper functioning of the democratic legal order is under threat; or,
3. relations within civil society (social cohesion, integration and the open society) are at stake.

When put into practice, Salafist religious tenets can give rise to antidemocratic and undemocratic activities of various kinds, to different extents. This applies not only to the movement's jihadi strand, with its approval of violence, but also to those committed to achieving their goals primarily through "dawah" (proselytisation). They, too, may well be actively pursuing antidemocratic goals and make use of undemocratic means.

The active practice of Salafism can clash with the fundamentals of the democratic legal order. Under one of its core precepts, "tawheed" (the "oneness of God"), the doctrine rejects democracy as a political system on principle: laws not handed down by God should not be recognised. Most Salafists in the Netherlands, however, do accept the nation's democratic legal order in practice. Whilst often aspiring to a society governed according to the Sharia (Islamic legal code), in practice the great majority of adherents do not translate that into actual extralegal efforts to impose Sharia law or to subvert the democratic system.

Although the “dawah” strands consider jihadist violence inopportune on theological and political grounds, their proselytising activities have been known to promote:

- rejection of the democratic legal order;
- the active promotion of intolerance, discrimination and hatred of other groups, including Jews and Shi’ites efforts; and,
- intolerant isolationism (strive to create “enclaves”, where those unwilling to conform are not welcome and within which all dissent is suppressed through intimidation).

In addition, the teachings of dawah Salafism can provide a breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism. In practice, though, there are significant variations in the extent to and the ways in which this is the case.

One of the basic principles of Salafism, “al-wala wa’l bara” (“loyalty and disavowal”, often interpreted as keeping a distance to anyone who does not share the same understanding of “tawheed”), justifies both strict isolation from non-Salafists and a discriminatory, polarising attitude towards those with different beliefs. Some Salafists cite this dogma to reject a society that respects diversity, thereby emphasising and magnifying differences between communities. In practice, though, few adherents observe this practice strictly.

## Conclusions


Salafism's fundamental body of thought has not changed since 2009. But its context has, and so have Salafists ways of expression and the space they claim to do so. This has raised concerns. Although Salafism is a spectrum with ideological shades, incidences of preachers actively promoting intolerant, isolationist, antidemocratic and polarising opinions represent a worrying development, as does the (renewed) realisation that aspects of its teachings can propel some adherents towards jihadist radicalisation.

Despite the apparent rigidity of its ideology, the Salafist movement is dynamic and diverse. For this reason, among others, it would not be right to brand the entire spectrum as a problem. That in turn could lead to a perception that Muslims in general are considered "problematic". This view is not only likely to cause dismay and contestation within the wider Muslim community but would also fuel the already widely-held belief that the Dutch government applies "double standards" when it comes to Islam. This in turn could encourage communities to withdraw even further into themselves, only reducing transparency and openness. Another potential negative side-effect of an undifferentiated approach is that it could cause more non-Muslims to equate Islam with "Salafism", thus paving the way to polarisation.

The 2010 framework defining how Dutch government determines its approach to the Salafist spectrum remains valid. However, recent developments, both external in the form of the conflict in Syria (including participation by Dutch jihadist fighters) and internal in the shape of a new dynamic more amenable to probing the boundaries of what is acceptable, do call for renewed and intensified state interest in Salafism as a phenomenon.

We can expect the Dutch public, politicians and the media to continue to raise questions about the nature and extent of activities of Salafist preachers and centres, and especially about how they relate to jihadism. Societal concern can have both positive and negative consequences. On one side of the coin, some Islamic institutions now seem to be thinking more carefully about who they invite to speak and preach, and who they will decline. On the other, a revival of the public debate around Salafism could result in greater community tensions and polarisation at home, whilst at the same time it could put strain on international relations with the native countries of Salafist preachers.





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