

## The Hofstad Group: The New Face of Terrorist Networks in Europe

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*Between 2003 and 2006, members of the so-called Hofstad group planned various terrorist attacks inside the Netherlands, including the assassination of controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Amateurish in its modus operandi and composed mostly of second-generation Muslim immigrants, Hofstad perfectly exemplifies the new terrorist networks that are growing in most European countries. Its perception of Europe as a battlefield of jihad, no less critical than Iraq or Afghanistan, signifies the break from the networks that operated in the continent in the 1990s. Its amorphous structure and lack of ties with international networks make Hofstad the quintessential example of the homegrown terrorism that is worrying European intelligence agencies.*

Recent events such as the July 2005 London bombings and the November 2004 assassination of Theo van Gogh have highlighted a significant change in the structure and composition of Islamist terrorist networks operating in Europe. Although “traditional” terrorist cells characterized by a complexly structured organization and strong links to the “mother group” in the Middle East or North Africa are still present and very active on the Continent, European authorities are increasingly worried by the emergence of homegrown Islamic terrorism. These new networks are composed mostly of European-born Muslims—sons and grandsons of Muslim immigrants who have come to Europe over the past fifty years—and a small but growing number of European converts to Islam. Generally they have only marginal ties to structured terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, which they consider merely a source of inspiration. They also tend to have a more spontaneous origin, often developing when a small group of childhood friends who have embraced radical Islam join with an older and charismatic figure. Although it is unlikely that these groups, given their relatively simple structures, could carry out large operations such as the attacks of 9/11, they are nevertheless enormously dangerous. Their deep knowledge of Western cultures and languages, possession of European passports, and relative lack of ties to large terrorist organizations make their detection a difficult task for authorities. As an increasing number of young European Muslims embrace radical Islam, most European law enforcement agencies are warning, the importance of these types of networks will only grow.

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This shift to homegrown terror seems to have been driven, at least in part, by events beyond Al Qaeda's control, such as the destruction of the group's Afghan base and the global crackdown that followed 9/11. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it runs athwart Al Qaeda's plans and desires. An indication to the contrary comes from the writings of Abu Musab al Suri, one of Al Qaeda's most important ideologues over the past fifteen years. Al Suri, who spent several years in Spain and Great Britain, often theorized that the role of Al Qaeda was much different, and far more limited, than what is commonly believed. In fact, he envisioned Al Qaeda as almost a temporary entity, whose very existence was only propaedeutic to the creation of independent Islamist groups throughout the world. "Al Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be," explained al Suri in a lecture he gave in 2000. "It is a call, a reference, a methodology."<sup>1</sup>

That Al Qaeda can be currently considered not so much a group in itself, but as a symbol and source of inspiration for groups and individuals, is particularly evident in Western countries. Various Western intelligence agencies, including the Dutch domestic agency AIVD (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst), have noted that as result of this process, widely dispersed local networks with a merely ideological affiliation with Al Qaeda have emerged and taken up the banner of jihad. In a 2004 report titled "From Dawa to Jihad," the AIVD also warned that "within the local networks in particular in the Western world (especially in Europe) Al Qaeda's ideology is interpreted in an even more extremist way than by the Al Qaeda's leadership itself. Often the actors in the networks are not really driven by strategic tactical considerations; they see themselves as participants in a mythical, apocalyptic final battle with Evil (the Western world) in the context of which, in principle, all exponents of Evil (in fact any Western citizen) should be destroyed."<sup>2</sup>

Another report published in 2004 by the AIVD clearly explained this evolution.<sup>3</sup> According to it, the "original" Arab-based form of Islamic fundamentalism has been joined, if not replaced, by a "'European' ethnicized form of radical Islam," which is characterized by "an awareness of its special position in a Western, hence supposedly hostile environment." According to this document, those Muslims living in the Netherlands, both immigrants and Dutch-born, who embrace a radical interpretation of Islam do so for a number of reasons. Some are impelled by the traditional "foreign motives," such as the various conflicts that pit Muslims against non-Muslims throughout the world. But domestic motives, such as the perceived negative image of Islam and Muslim immigrants among the native European population, are believed to be just as important.

Although this trend is present, with varying intensity, in most European countries, Dutch authorities witnessed first-hand the growth of a group that had all the aforementioned characteristics: the so-called Hofstad Group.

### **Evolution of Dutch Terror Networks**

Since the beginning of the 1990s various North African and Middle Eastern Islamist terrorist organizations have built a presence on Dutch territory, establishing cells that have provided logistical support and recruits to the mother group.<sup>4</sup> The Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, for example, has been one of the most active groups operating in the Netherlands, planning attacks both inside and outside the country.<sup>5</sup> With some exceptions, the individuals involved in these activities were mainly militants who had lived in the Netherlands for a short time, often illegally, and had established radical connections before entering Dutch territory.<sup>6</sup>

In January 2002 both authorities and the general public were shocked by the news that two young Dutch-born Muslims of Moroccan descent had died while fighting against

the Indian army in Kashmir. The episode caused the AIVD to investigate why the two teenagers, born and raised in the quiet southern town of Eindhoven, had left their families and traveled to war-torn Kashmir to fight jihad. The findings are summarized in an extensive report that details the mechanisms of jihad recruitment in the Netherlands, analyzing the characteristics of the most likely recruits, the profile of the recruiters, and the typical pattern of the recruitment process.<sup>7</sup>

The investigators found that recruits for Islamist groups in the Netherlands tend to be men between the ages of 18 and 32, who can be divided in three “risk groups.”<sup>8</sup> In the first category are converts, young men of ethnic Dutch descent who left their natal Christian faith and embraced the most radical form of Islam. The second category is composed of young Muslim immigrants who have been in the Netherlands for only a few years, have a scant knowledge of Dutch language and society, and, in many cases, are living in the country illegally.<sup>9</sup> The third category is the one that concerns authorities the most, for it is the largest. It is composed of young second- and third-generation immigrants to the Netherlands, predominantly from Morocco. Although their levels of education and economic integration vary, all of them seem to suffer from an identity crisis. And despite seeming—at least on the surface—to be completely integrated into Dutch society, they feel rejected by it and complain about racism and job discrimination.

Even though most individuals who decide to embrace extremist Islam have already been introduced preliminarily to Islamist ideology (either at mosques or through the Internet), the AIVD found the role of a recruiter to be fundamental in the radicalization process. Most recruiters are mature individuals, in their 30s or older, who have had experience in fighting jihad in places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, or Chechnya and are “capable of generating admiration, respect and an image of wisdom and capable leadership in their environment.”<sup>10</sup> In a long and gradual recruitment process, the recruiter begins by “spotting,” then manipulates the individual through various phases until the final goal is reached: the recruit’s participation in jihad.

The 2002 AIVD report portrays, in great detail and quite accurately, a phenomenon that had been gaining strength since the beginning of the 1990s. It describes a well-oiled system for enlisting new members in which the recruiter was a pivotal component, a necessary actor that followed the potential recruit from his spotting to his “graduation” as a jihadi. Yet by the end of 2002, the ways in which young Dutch Muslims entered the world of radical Islam had significantly changed.

The events of 11 September, 2001 had an earth-shattering impact on Muslims throughout the world, and the daring actions of Al Qaeda struck a chord with many alienated youths. Most Muslims in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in the West, strongly condemned the terrorist attacks; but polls indicated that almost 50 percent understood the motives of the attackers, and 11 percent openly supported a jihad against the United States. Approval of the attacks among Dutch Muslims rose to 26 percent when the polling sample was limited to those of Moroccan descent.<sup>11</sup> In Holland, as in the majority of other Western countries, the attacks spawned a renewed Islamist fervor, with a growing number of young men and women embracing the most militant interpretation of their religion. A wealth of websites, publications, chat rooms, videos, summer camps, and conferences made access to Islamist ideology extremely easy, especially in the tolerant and free Dutch society.

The effects of this fervor were immediately felt. In its 2003 annual report the AIVD acknowledged that the average age of Dutch individuals taking an interest in jihad was showing an alarming drop: many teenagers as young as 16 were becoming actively involved in radical activities.<sup>12</sup> The report cited the case of two Amsterdam teenagers who, in January 2003, attempted to travel to Chechnya to join the local mujahideen fighting Russian forces.

The two boys were arrested by Ukrainian police as they sought to cross the border into Russia and sent back to the Netherlands, where they were interrogated by the AIVD. After having determined that the two had acted on their own and had received no outside support, Dutch authorities released them.<sup>13</sup> They could not possibly know that one of the teenagers, Samir Azzouz, would later become one of Holland's most dangerous Islamic fundamentalists.

Once back in the Netherlands, Azzouz settled in Rotterdam, where he became involved in the city's Islamist scene. There he met Abida Kabaj, the young spokeswoman of a charity suspected of providing funds to Hamas, who later became his wife.<sup>14</sup> He also began to frequent a phone center in the suburb of Schiedam, an establishment owned by a Turkish Islamist that was used by a group of young Muslims to pray, watch gory tapes of terrorist actions, and talk about their desire to participate in jihad. It was at the Schiedam phone center that Azzouz became friends with another very young fanatic, Jason Walters.

Born in Amersfoort in 1985, Jason Walters is the son of an American serviceman and a native Dutch mother. By all accounts, Jason lived a quiet childhood, worshipping at a local Baptist church with his father and playing soccer with friends. In 2000, Jason and his younger brother Jermaine converted to Islam.<sup>15</sup> Within a few months of his conversion, Jason began to embrace a militant interpretation of his new faith. He visited radical websites, posting messages glorifying jihad and talking about killing those he deemed enemies of Islam. The attacks of 9/11 only increased Jason's militancy. Using the screen name Abu Mujahid Al Amrikie (Abu Mujahid the American), he contacted like-minded cyber-jihadis, attempting to join the jihad. His views soon became so radical that he was kicked out of a local mosque he had accused of being too moderate.

Walters began to frequent known jihadi meeting places, including the Schiedam phone shop. By the summer of 2002, the AIVD began to monitor the activities of Azzouz, Walters, and other militants who used to meet at the phone shop in Schiedam, the Tawheed mosque, and private apartments in various Dutch cities. The group, which could be more properly described as a loosely connected network of acquaintances, would soon be nicknamed by the authorities "Hofstad," Dutch for "capital."<sup>16</sup>

Among those who participated in Hofstad's activities was a young Amsterdam West native of Moroccan descent, Mohammed Bouyeri. According to the accounts of friends and acquaintances, Bouyeri was a quiet, ordinary boy who excelled in school.<sup>17</sup> Even though Bouyeri seemed to be headed in the right direction, he was being influenced by his environment, where crime, gang activities, unemployment, and substance abuse were rampant. From 1997 on Bouyeri was involved in repeated criminal incidents and in 2001 he spent a few weeks in jail for assault.

Yet, despite baleful influence of life in the neighborhood, Bouyeri was still trying to build a future for himself. With the help of state benefits he enrolled in college, where he planned to study accounting. But by the end of 2001 Bouyeri was displaying clear signs of radicalization. In college he began to belligerently harangue fellow Muslim students who drank alcohol.<sup>18</sup> He became increasingly absorbed in Islamic readings, grew a beard, and began to wear traditional Islamic clothing. In the spring of 2002 Bouyeri left his parents' home for a tiny apartment located in Sloterveer, another poor section of Amsterdam West.

The move confirmed Bouyeri's passage from radicalization to militancy. He became increasingly active online and began to write his own pamphlets, riddled with anti-Dutch and anti-Semitic slurs, which he distributed to a growing number of worshippers he met at the radical Tawheed mosque.<sup>19</sup> Bouyeri also began to meet militants from other Dutch cities. His roommate, Nouredine El Fatmi, a 21-year-old Moroccan living in Holland illegally, had worked in the phone center in Schiedam, where he had met Jason Walters and Samir Azzouz.

Leading the meetings in Schiedam was a Syrian man in his 40s who lodged in a room above the shop.<sup>20</sup> The Syrian, whose name is believed to be Riduan al Issar, was a self-proclaimed mujahid with a mysterious past and a knowledge of Islam that, though limited, surpassed that of most youngsters at the phone shop. Fascinated by his charisma and apparent learning, Bouyeri and El Fatmi invited al Issar to give lectures in their Amsterdam apartment.

Soon the apartment became the key meeting point for a group of forty to fifty young men who came from various Dutch cities to listen to al Issar and to exchange views and tapes about jihad. By December 2002, Dutch authorities began to take notice of the *huiskamer bijeenkomsten* (living room meetings) that were taking place in the small apartment in Slotmeer, monitoring the people who attended them.<sup>21</sup> Inside the apartment the youths engaged in “educational sessions,” deepening their knowledge of radical Islam. Al Issar gave speeches quite frequently; but when the Syrian was not available other group members, including Bouyeri, led the sessions. As if they were joining an exclusive private club, new participants were welcomed only after being introduced by an existing member in good standing. Some of the newcomers were already committed radicals, while others attended simply out of curiosity. Many young men took part in the discussions, but by the summer of 2003 the Hofstad group had established a core of fifteen to twenty members, including Bouyeri, Azzouz, El Fatmi, Jason Walters, and al Issar.

The group’s activities deeply concerned Dutch authorities. In October 2003 Spanish officials warned their Dutch counterparts that two members of the Hofstad group had recently visited a known militant in Barcelona. Fearing the group was about to carry out an attack, Dutch authorities arrested some of its key members. The men were released only a few days later, as no concrete evidence of an attack was produced. The episode did not deter the group. In June 2004, three members of the Hofstad group drove to Portugal just a few days before the kickoff of the European Cup soccer tournament being hosted by the Iberian country.<sup>22</sup> Portuguese and Dutch authorities suspected that the group was planning to kill José Manuel Durão Barroso, a former Portuguese prime minister who was then president-designate of the European Commission, and other important guests at a reception held in Porto the night before the tournament began.<sup>23</sup> Certain that the threat from the Dutch hit squad was imminent, Portuguese police arrested the three Hofstad members and deported them to the Netherlands.<sup>24</sup>

A few days later, on 30 June, Rotterdam police arrested Samir Azzouz, accusing him of involvement in the robbery of a supermarket where he worked.<sup>25</sup> According to Dutch authorities, Azzouz had left the shop’s shutter open for his accomplice, whom he had met at the Schiedam phone center. A search of Azzouz’s apartment turned up bombmaking materials, night vision goggles, a silencer for an automatic gun, ammunition, and a bulletproof vest. Police also found maps and floor plans of the Schiphol Airport, the Borssele nuclear power plant, and various governmental buildings in The Hague.<sup>26</sup> Dutch authorities believed they had found irrefutable evidence that Azzouz was planning an attack.

A few months later a member of Hofstad carried out the group’s first successful attack. On 2 November Mohammed Bouyeri shot and ritually butchered on a busy Amsterdam boulevard the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Van Gogh had directed a movie about Islam’s treatment of women that had been heavily discussed in radical chat rooms frequented by members of the Hofstad group. The men had agreed that the Islamic punishment for the film’s director (and its writer, the Somali-born member of Parliament Ayaan Hirsi Ali) was death. After executing what he later claimed was his religious duty, Bouyeri engaged the police in a shootout and was arrested.

As Bouyeri was put in detention, the AIVD moved to arrest the other members of the Hofstad group. Twelve were arrested in raids carried out in different locations, charged with belonging to a terrorist organization. Authorities declared their certainty that the group was planning follow-up operations targeting Ayaan Hirsi Ali and other preeminent Dutch political figures.<sup>27</sup> On 10 November, police moved to arrest Jason Walters and his roommate Ismail Aknikh in their The Hague apartment. Expecting the arrival of the police, the men had stashed weapons inside the apartment. They were arrested only after a fourteen-hour-long siege during which the two wounded three policemen by throwing hand grenades at them.

Despite the quick action taken by the AIVD, two key members of the Hofstad group, Nouredine El Fatmi and Reduan al Issar, managed to escape the dragnet. Yet, by the first weeks of 2005, El Fatmi was back in Europe. He settled in Brussels, but continued to communicate with sympathizers of the group in the Netherlands. In June 2005 police arrested El Fatmi in Amsterdam, as he was accompanied by his wife, Soumaya Sahla. They had in their possession a fully loaded machine gun, ammunition, and a silencer, which authorities believe were intended to be used in killing Dutch politicians. Sahla, a radical jihadi who had participated in many meetings of the Hofstad group, had in fact attempted to obtain the private addresses of several prominent politicians through a pharmacy where her sister worked in The Hague.<sup>28</sup>

But although El Fatmi was finally behind bars, another key member of the group was free again. In April 2005 a court acquitted Samir Azzouz, deciding that there was not enough evidence to prove that the Amsterdam teenager was planning an attack against any of the buildings he was suspected of having scouted in 2004. Although the court acknowledged that Azzouz was a committed radical who wanted to replace the Dutch government with an Islamic one and had “terrorist intentions,” his plans were considered so clumsy and unsophisticated that they did not represent a “concrete threat.”<sup>29</sup> He was sentenced to only three months in jail for possession of a firearm, a term he had already served. Once released, Azzouz immediately became involved in planning new attacks, leading a small group of remnants of the Hofstad group and their sympathizers. On 14 October 2005, police arrested Azzouz and six other men (including Jason Walters’s younger brother Jermaine) who were suspected of planning attacks against politicians and the AIVD. Other reports suggest the group’s intention was to target an El Al airliner while it was landing at or taking off from Schiphol Airport. Whatever the target, it appears from the taped video message he left for his family that Azzouz wanted to die in the attack.

In March 2006, after months of very controversial hearings, a Rotterdam court agreed with the prosecution’s argument that the Hofstad group, despite lacking a formal structure, is indeed a terrorist organization. Using new antiterrorism legislation passed only a few months earlier, the court found guilty nine of the fourteen men on trial. Although the conviction of the core of the Hofstad group represents an important success for Dutch authorities, the threat it posed is far from over. Officials estimate that the group had more than fifty members and that at least a few hundred radical Islamists are now living in the Netherlands.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, as of April 2006, the AIVD estimates that between ten and twenty jihadist networks are active in the Netherlands, most of them autonomous local networks similar to the Hofstad group.<sup>31</sup> Rather than being an isolated case, the Hofstad group seems to mark a new trend that will characterize terrorist activities in the Netherlands in the years to come.

### **The Novelty of Hofstad**

The Hofstad group shows how the nature of Islamist terrorist networks operating in Europe has evolved. Its novelty is evident, first of all, in the group’s choice of targets. Although

international events may have contributed to the men's radicalization, their rage was directed mainly toward individuals they perceived as their immediate enemies: local figures who they believed were fighting Islam in the Netherlands. The letter that Bouyeri pinned on van Gogh's body—significantly, written in a traditional rhyming Dutch verse form—is full of references to events and characters in Dutch political life; no “global” Islamic issues are mentioned. The Hofstad group, composed mostly of individuals who either were born or had spent most of their lives in the Netherlands, was completely immersed in Dutch society, and members therefore targeted local enemies. The AIVD describes this new phenomenon as “European jihad,” a new phase of Islamist terrorism in which the key actors are “European Muslims who are prepared to commit attacks in their own country” and who are motivated primarily by domestic issues.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to its focus on domestic issues and targets, other characteristics of Hofstad mark its sharp break with groups of the past: its lack of recruitment and its lack of structure. As discussed earlier, in its 2002 report the AIVD provided an extensive analysis of recruits and recruiters. The breakdown of recruits into three types still fits the Hofstad group, which had a small number of converts (Jason and Jermaine Walters); a few recent, and in large part illegal, immigrants to the Netherlands (al Issar, El Fatmi); and a substantial number of those whom the AIVD considers at highest risk, young second- and third-generation immigrants (Bouyeri, Azzouz, Aknikh). But absent from the picture is any recruiter, although the Dutch officials considered his role crucial in their analysis of 2002.

The importance of the recruiter has been widely debated, especially after 2001. Particularly interesting, both for their research methods and for their results, are the studies conducted by Marc Sageman. The conclusion Sageman drew from his groundbreaking study is that an absence of top-down recruitment and of brainwashing characterizes the activities of Al Qaeda and affiliated groups. Indeed, he compares Al Qaeda to a prestigious graduate school, extremely selective rather than eager to accept all applicants.<sup>33</sup> Sageman emphasizes that radical Islamist propaganda is so widespread and easily accessible that recruiters do not need to indoctrinate the newcomers. A recruiter's job is generally limited to spotting the most promising among the many young men who already embrace a militant interpretation of Islam and aspire to join the jihad, and then introducing them to his contacts in organized militant groups. A recruiter is therefore more properly viewed as a gatekeeper, an experienced and well-connected militant who does no proselytizing but simply opens the gates of jihad to recruits, linking them with other militants after carefully selecting them.

The trend observed by Sageman became increasingly prominent after 9/11. The wave of radical sentiments felt by many young Muslims expanded the reach of Islamist propaganda, making radical ideas more readily available to sympathizers worldwide. Consequently, the recruiter had to devote even less effort to radicalizing potential recruits, as the indoctrination process became increasingly self-generated. Today there is what the AIVD calls autonomous radicalization, “a spontaneous, interactive and largely autonomous process” through which young men (and, to a lesser degree, young women) embrace radical Islam on their own, with no support from the outside.<sup>34</sup> Throughout the Western world, indoctrination from above is ever more rare.

Autonomous radicalization is clearly displayed in the case of the Hofstad group. In their discovery of radical Islam, all members of the group relied more heavily on their own research than on more traditional and established radicalizing actors such as preachers in mosques. As already noted, the Internet was the source of most of the information that led the young members of the group to embrace militant Islam. Even more strikingly, the Hofstad group challenges the view that the recruiter plays an important role as a

gatekeeper. Focused mostly on domestic targets and issues, Hofstad seems to have had no interest in having the doors of international jihad opened—and thus it eliminated the sole function left for the recruiter; nevertheless, it functioned as an effective terrorist group.

The only figure in Hofstad that might resemble a recruiter is Riduan al Issar, the Syrian preacher who led discussions first at the Schiedam phone center and later at Bouyeri's apartment. Almost instantaneously al Issar became the spiritual leader of the Hofstad group, lecturing at its *huiskamer bijeenkomsten*.<sup>35</sup> Yet al Issar's role was different than that of a recruiter. First of all, he was not pivotal in radicalizing the members of the group because, as already noted, they converted to radical Islam on their own. Nor did he serve as a gatekeeper. The AIVD has unearthed no evidence that al Issar put members of the Hofstad group in contact with more structured terrorist organizations—with which, in all likelihood, he himself lacked any ties.<sup>36</sup> Although he was a charismatic figure whom all the members respected, his role ultimately was not crucially important and he performed none of the functions of a recruiter.

Increasingly in the Netherlands, the absence of the recruiter—striking in Hofstad's case—is no longer the exception. Already in 2003, the AIVD noticed that “local networks not only emerged as a result of top-down recruitment from jihadists abroad, but that so-called grass-roots radicalization, eventually leading to home-grown terrorism, was gaining ground.”<sup>37</sup> The AIVD was witnessing the growth of local autonomous networks, characterized by the spontaneous aggregation of like-minded individuals who lacked any formal affiliation to international groups and operated independently. Comparing this new phenomenon with past trends, in 2006 the AIVD observed that “while recruitment usually involves a personal, asymmetric relationship between recruiter and recruit, the growth and developments of local autonomous networks depend upon the contribution of all members.”<sup>38</sup>

In Sageman's view, the recruiter (as gatekeeper) plays a crucial role: without his mediation, “the prospective candidate would remain a sympathizer rather than become a full-fledged mujahed.”<sup>39</sup> Sageman's analysis holds for Islamic radicals before 9/11, but the case of the Hofstad group shows that it no longer fully applies. Such individuals as Bouyeri and Azzouz can be considered full-fledged mujahideen, even though they never met a recruiter. Such an intermediary is necessary if the individual or the group wants to participate in the jihad on an international level. But, as a member of the Hofstad group wrote in a chat room, “you don't have to go to Afghanistan or Iraq to wage jihad, you can wage jihad anywhere or at any time.”<sup>40</sup>

Most of the members of the Hofstad group had close ties to the country in which they were operating. For them, attacking “enemies of Islam” in the Netherlands was as important, and logistically more convenient, as fighting them in Iraq or Afghanistan. Some members of Hofstad traveled to Pakistan for training and other had contacts with leaders of Al Qaeda-linked groups, yet the group did not become part of an international network. Because of its local focus, it did not need to have the doors of global jihad opened. The Hofstad group remained a local autonomous network, inspired by but never fully involved in the global jihadi movement.

In itself, the lack of a recruiter made the Hofstad group typologically distinct from most Western terrorist organizations. But this absence also made the group atypical in another respect: without a clearly dominant, charismatic individual, Hofstad developed an egalitarian spirit. Even though the group had some central figures, such as Bouyeri and Azzouz, its key members did not display true leadership qualities. Those members who were most knowledgeable, most faithful in attending meetings, and most charismatic



obviously stood out, but they never took on the role of a leader. In the absence of a formal structure, every member was free to act on his own, without awaiting the direction of some superior. For example, Dutch authorities believe that Bouyeri and Azzouz conceived their attacks by themselves. While their intentions were clear to other members of the group, who might have been aware of some details of their planning, their actions did not emerge from a group effort.

This unusual characteristic of Hofstad might lead some to question whether it is actually a proper terrorist group. In its loose structure it parallels another social phenomenon that worries Dutch authorities: Moroccan youth gangs. These *jeugdbendes*, as they are generally called in the Netherlands, are particularly active in West Amsterdam, the section of the city where most members of Hofstad grew up and where the group met most frequently. *Jeugdbendes* are mostly composed of groups of friends from the same neighborhood—boys between 16 and 20—who regularly congregate in certain squares or public gardens. Unlike many American gangs, *jeugdbendes* do not engage in large-scale criminal activities; their members limit their unlawful behavior to petty crime and unarmed confrontations with other gang members or even innocent passersby, often pursued for no other reason than to show bravado and impress their peers. Exactly like the Hofstad group, *jeugdbendes* lack structure and leaders. According to studies conducted by social scientists, those in *jeugdbendes* with strong personalities do assume a steering role, but no member of the gang is a properly defined leader who can order the other boys what to do.<sup>41</sup>

The Hofstad group also resembles a *jeugdbende* more than a terrorist group in its lack of a specific goal. Terrorist groups generally have a more or less realistic set of goals and a corresponding plan of action to accomplish them. *Jeugdbendes*, in contrast, are simply groups of disenfranchised youths that spend their time wandering the streets of Dutch cities looking for excitement and a sense of belonging. Unlike American gangs, they do not seek to control territory or to enrich themselves through activities such as selling drugs. The Hofstad group is similarly devoid of goals, with its members seemingly driven more by a nihilistic attraction to violence than by a concrete political goal. Like most Salafi groups, the Hofstad group engaged in *takfir*, the violent denunciation of people who have different faiths, including liberal Muslims.<sup>42</sup> Yet its members proposed no feasible alternative or plan of action besides the brutal assassination of some prominent figures in Dutch society they considered enemies of Islam.

In their meetings and in online chat rooms, the members of the Hofstad group fantasized about overthrowing the government and establishing an Islamic state. But these “plans” are merely dreams, the delusions of a group of teenagers with no real strategy. Conversations among the members of the group taped by the AIVD reveal their childish superficiality and abstraction. Walters and Aknikh, for example, whose apartment had been bugged by the AIVD, were overheard saying that their first act, once an Islamic state was established in the Netherlands, would be to execute those who had insulted Islam by throwing them down from Rotterdam’s Euromast, a high tower overlooking the city’s harbor.<sup>43</sup> The group’s members were quintessentially nihilistic, certain about what they hated but unclear about what they wanted. Samir Azzouz perfectly summarized their philosophy in court in December 2005: “We reject you. We reject your system. We hate you. I guess that about sums it up.”<sup>44</sup>

If Hofstad is something different from a terrorist group because it lacks a hierarchical structure and specific goals, how should it be categorized? Probably it is best viewed as a jihadist network, which, according to the AIVD, “differs from other terrorist groups and organizations in that it lacks a formal (hierarchical) structure, and has an informal, flexible membership and fluctuating leadership.”<sup>45</sup> Networks do contain a core group, to which

individuals are more or less loosely attached; but because central control is reduced to a minimum, members take the initiative and act on their own. Individuals in the Hofstad group, while all united by a common worldview, acted independently, occasionally forming smaller subgroups of two or three but never operating with a formal structure.

Defining the nature of the group is not merely an academic argument over semantics. Indeed, it was one of the key issues in the 2006 Rotterdam trial of fourteen of the Hofstad group's members. A major challenge for prosecutors was proving that the loosely connected network of friends fitted the definition of terrorist organization detailed by the Dutch penal code, as defense lawyers questioned the very existence of a group. The Rotterdam court cited the commonality of intent as its main reason for embracing the prosecution's argument.<sup>46</sup>

### Holland after Hofstad: A Realistic Threat Assessment

The Rotterdam trial inflicted an almost mortal blow on the Hofstad group, as most of its key members received jail terms of up to fifteen years; Mohammed Bouyeri, convicted in 2005, had already been sentenced to life in prison. Yet the spiritual legacy of the Hofstad group continues to strongly influence thousands of young Muslims in the Netherlands. In fact, after the assassination of Theo van Gogh, Dutch authorities noted that many young Muslims were finding radical Islam significantly more attractive.<sup>47</sup> As the AIVD has pointed out, some young Muslims even see Azzouz and Bouyeri as "role models."<sup>48</sup> A disturbing number of Dutch teenagers of Moroccan descent view the members of the Hofstad group almost as heroes: their pictures are exchanged like baseball cards, and their names scribbled on backpacks.<sup>49</sup> A prison guard interviewed by the Dutch newspaper *Telegraaf* described the respect shown to Ismail Aknikh by other Muslim detainees in the Rotterdam penitentiary of De Schie: "He is adored like a prophet, they literally kiss his feet."<sup>50</sup>

Among certain groups of young European Muslims, the act of joining violent jihadi groups is seen as positive and "cool," little different from embracing other youth trends such as the hip-hop or punk underworld.<sup>51</sup> Dozens of radical websites in Dutch have sprung up, spreading jihadist ideology and praising the members of the Hofstad group. The AIVD views these phenomena as the manifestation of a radical Islamist counterculture among young Dutch Muslims. Although few of those who embrace this ideology will turn to violence, its popularity reflects the polarization in Dutch society and suggests a dark future if this counterculture becomes even more widespread.

The fears of Dutch authorities are grounded in reality: since the van Gogh assassination, officials have reported several cases in which isolated radicals, often recent converts to Islam, fascinated by the endeavors and, probably, the notoriety of Bouyeri and Azzouz, have decided to emulate them. The AIVD refers to these individuals as *zelfontbranders* (self-radicalized)—individuals who "go through the entire process of radicalization and recruitment seated in front of the virtual world" of their computer.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, as the arrests of October 2005 proved, remnants of the group are still extremely active in the country and are bringing in new adherents, most of them relatives, neighbors, or local acquaintances of the hard-core members.<sup>53</sup> And, as already noted, ten to twenty jihadist networks are estimated to be active in the Netherlands.<sup>54</sup>

Given this state of affairs, a reasonably precise prediction can be made of future trends in the evolution of Islamist terrorist networks in the Netherlands. They seem to be taking three different forms, differing in organization and outlook. First, international terrorist groups such as the Algerian GSPC or Abu Musab al Zarqawi's global network will continue to have a presence in Holland. These "traditional" terrorist cells are well

entrenched in Dutch territory but maintain a global outlook, operating as part of a worldwide organization. However, the greatest number of potential terrorists in the country will belong to autonomous networks, composed mostly of young Dutch-born militants and often amateurish in their modus operandi. These fall into two categories—the second and third kinds of group—depending on their focus.

Some autonomous networks, like Hofstad, can be defined as purely local, choosing to focus their attention almost solely on the Netherlands. Others, although sharing many characteristics with Hofstad, are internationally oriented. The line between locally and internationally oriented autonomous networks is often blurred. Internationally oriented networks sometimes rapidly switch their focus to the domestic situation, and the converse is equally common. Samir Azzouz, for example, first unsuccessfully tried to join the jihad in Chechnya and then, upon his return to Holland, concentrated instead on domestic targets. A further complicating factor is the Internet, which is helping domestic and international jihadist networks to communicate far more easily.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, in the future traditional terrorist structures probably will rely more heavily on local networks for logistic support or even will franchise operations.

In 2006 the AIVD noted a pattern whereby “members of local autonomous networks conclude that they lack the necessary organizational facilities or expertise to realize their jihad plans, seek to approach international elements and thereby wholly or partly lose their autonomous character.”<sup>56</sup> This trend—homegrown networks operating as *longae manus* of transnational jihadi groups—is evident throughout Europe. Although Al Qaeda’s exact level of involvement in the attacks is still unclear, the July 2005 London bombings appear to have been carried out by a local autonomous network that received some form of support (which may have been solely ideological) from the organization’s networks in Pakistan.<sup>57</sup> It is very likely that in the future, local networks will look for support from international Islamist terrorist organizations and, while perhaps not completely losing their autonomous status, become operationally integrated into Al Qaeda’s global network.

But even if such local networks do not establish operational ties with global terrorist groups, they are still an extremely significant potential threat. Sageman has argued that without a link to the global Salafi movement (usually, but not necessarily, provided by the recruiter), a network will never pose a serious threat to society, as it lacks the resources and the know-how to be effective;<sup>58</sup> however, an analysis of recent terrorist operations in Europe proves that his analysis no longer applies. The bombings in Madrid and London cost a few thousand dollars—money the attackers raised through petty crime and personal resources, respectively. Individuals can acquire expertise in constructing homemade explosive devices online, as investigators speculate the London bombers might have done.<sup>59</sup> In short, today’s acts of terrorism are extremely cheap and easy to execute, and even an independent and inexperienced group of motivated militants can carry them out.

Yet the real danger lies not in the terrorist attacks that these homegrown networks might carry out but in the polarization between different ethnic and religious groups that their actions might cause in the long term.<sup>60</sup> That these attacks are perpetrated by homegrown groups—members of the very society they target—seriously damages relations between the various communities of the affected country. The repercussions are particularly severe in Europe, where social tensions between the ethnic European population and Muslim communities are already disturbingly high for reasons that include but go beyond terrorism. Such attacks heighten these preexisting tensions, increasing distrust toward the Muslim population among ethnic Europeans and, consequently, Muslims’ sense of exclusion from mainstream society.

This self-perpetuating spiral of distrust and hatred became apparent in the Netherlands after Theo van Gogh's assassination. Prosecutors in the Bouyeri trial declared that the group's aim was to "drive a wedge between different segments of Dutch society," and some events indicate that the group achieved partial success.<sup>61</sup> Forty percent of Dutch interviewed in the immediate aftermath of the murder said they hoped that Muslims "no longer felt at home" in the Netherlands.<sup>62</sup> A number of mosques and Islamic schools across the country were vandalized or firebombed; in response, churches were also damaged, triggering a rise in attacks and counterattacks that shocked what had traditionally been considered one of Europe's most tolerant societies. Applying pressure to the weak spot in an already fragile social environment, the killing significantly exacerbated the tensions already present in the country.

Only by putting the event into this larger social perspective can one understand why a prominent Dutch politician described the assassination of Theo van Gogh as "Holland's 9/11."<sup>63</sup> The Dutch government has estimated that by 2020, individuals of non-ethnic Dutch origin (most of whom are Muslim) will outnumber ethnic Dutch in the country's four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht).<sup>64</sup> These numbers suggest that mounting tensions between its Muslim and non-Muslim communities could have devastating effects for the Netherlands. As a consequence, the threat posed by autonomous networks such as Hofstad, as amateurish as they might appear, should not be underestimated.

## Notes

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9. Ibid., p. 10.

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