

# **Palestine International Institute**

**Aspiring to Bind Palestinians in the Diaspora  
and Expatriates to the Homeland**

## **The Palestinian Community In the Netherlands**

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## **Foreword**

The Palestine International Institute (PII) pioneers in producing studies provided by researchers in the Diaspora in coordination with the Institute, under the broad category, Palestinians in Diaspora. This time we are pleased to present our readers with the 2008 reviewed and updated edition of our study titled, 'The Palestinian Community in The Netherlands'. This study falls under the category of the Horizontal Studies series which examines the emergence and evolution of communities and tackles issues related to the origins, structure, makeup, size, problems and challenges of Palestinian communities in the Diaspora. The PII also issues the Parallel Studies series which are supplemental studies with indirect bearing on communities, such as the study on Arab-European relationships. These studies are overseen and supervised by the executive chairman and the research team. In addition, our scientific committee, comprising Dr. Mohammad Mikdashi, Dr. Hasan Al-Charif, Dr. Emile Nemah Khoury and Dr. Nabil Dajani, looks over the upgrading and maintenance of the PII website, as well as the update of the Vertical Studies series, which are studies on the elite, focusing on activists of the Palestinian communities in the Diaspora.

Before scrutinizing the data, statistics and information, we wish to indicate that this study presents academic insight based on scientific and objective research. This is indeed one of the goals for which the PII was established. Our researchers have exerted considerable efforts in order to overcome the difficulties imposed by the scarcity of resources and documents in an attempt to achieve integrated, rather than fractured data at a time when scientific research is considerably lacking and insignificant. The importance of this study, as well as other PII studies, emerges from a number of factors, the most important of which are the following:

- It comes as an early harvest in virgin territory, where documents and sources of information on these subjects, in both Arab and foreign libraries,

are virtually nonexistent, including the Internet and centers that specialize in Palestinian issues.

- No scholar or institution has come up with a partial, needless to say complete, series of studies about Palestinians in the Diaspora in countries where they exist or about communities of countries that have hosted Palestinians. Despite all said, we acknowledge the fact that the present study is in its early stages and is open to further development and expansion on the basis of professionalism, authenticity, transparency and documentation and with the intent of being broadened and updated. Our mission and duty dictate that we ensure it is subject to the above processes in each of its new editions.

The PII welcomes any comments on the development of its studies and scientific and research references with the aim of achieving its final goals and aspirations. If it appears that we are slightly lagging, it is because our human and financial resources are limited and the conditions under which the research is being conducted are difficult.

The time to pick the fruits of our labors is near. This is the result of an effort exerted by a dedicated team, despite our humble resources. Our gratitude goes to all scholars and researchers who contributed to this and other studies which aim to reach those interested, address their patriotic, national, human and intellectual aspirations, and reveal facts and data which were previously unknown to those who have had no access to such information.

We reiterate our desire to receive feedback, and urge our readers to send us their comments and suggestions to improve or advance our studies.

As'ad Abdul-Rahman,  
Executive Director

## **Acknowledgement**

The Palestine International Institute wishes to extend its heartily appreciation and gratitude to all those who contributed to this study in various ways, including research, gathering information, translation, editing, typing... etc.

Thanks are due to all PII staff, including researchers and technical support, for their hard work and dedication, which is why this study has been produced with useful content and in proper form. Without their efforts this study would not have been possible.

## **Chapter One** **History of the Palestinian**

# Community in the Netherlands

## The Beginnings

The history of immigration of the Palestinian community to the Netherlands dates back to the early 1950s, the years that followed the Palestinian *Nakba* in 1948. At the time, a small number of students came to the country seeking both higher education and work. This group of students encountered difficult conditions as well as a society which was sympathetic towards Israel and highly ignorant of the Palestinian tragedy, *Al-Nakba*. This position characterized the left, including the communists, who were much stronger then. However, the Palestinian presence in the Netherlands began to change at the beginning of the 1960s, particularly in the years 1961 and 1963, during which time a group of 120 Palestinian laborers came to the country by way of a margarine firm, ROMI, which had a branch in the Palestinian town of Nablus. Consequently, the majority of group members came from Nablus and its surrounding villages and refugee camps.

The above-mentioned firm lodged these people in overcrowded accommodations and imposed restrictive work conditions on them which limited their freedom of movement and kept them constantly overworked. In addition, they were confined to their accommodations and forbidden to work at any other place under risk of deportation. Moreover, the firm took no efforts to ensure that these laborers learned Dutch. Due to work pressures, it was difficult for them to find the time to learn the language or to mix with and assimilate into Dutch society. As a result, they kept their original Palestinian habits and practices and received very little from the new culture they lived in. Strong support for Israel in the Netherlands discouraged them from participating in any activity in support of the Palestinian cause. Hence, they opted to present themselves as Jordanians, rather than Palestinians. Even the inhabitants of the town of Vlaardingen, where they stayed, were not aware of the presence of a Palestinian community amongst them because of their low profile.

This gathering of Palestinian laborers had a positive effect on the previously mentioned students. Their presence prompted them to establish a Palestinian association in the Netherlands in 1966, with the objective of promoting awareness of the Palestinian cause. Their activity concentrated on information and fund raising for the PLO.

This association, which survive for only a few months due to lack of sufficient resources, was led from the laborers' side, by the late Mahmoud Al-Rabbani, the late Musa Al-Saudi and Dr. Wasef Sahdeed, together with Rawhi Al-Khadr.

## Post 1967 Era

After the June 1967 war, the Palestine Dutch Committee was formed by a group of Dutch leftists who were supportive of the Palestinian cause. Still active today, this committee, however, remains confined to the left-wing movement and, despite great efforts exerted by its members, could not force itself into the public sphere in the Netherlands.

Moreover, no activity for the Palestinian community was recorded until the beginning of the 1980s. All previous activities had been confined to the Palestine Dutch Committee and to a few Palestinian individuals among them Mahmoud Al-Rabbani and Musa Al-Saudi. At the beginning of 1980, a group of Palestinians from the community called for a meeting to discuss possible means of bringing about pro-Palestinian action. The meeting was held on January 26, and was attended by PLO Representative in Germany Abdullah Al-Afranji. In this meeting, the Palestinian Union in the Netherlands was established, creating positive reactions within the local Palestinian community where many of its members enrolled in the nascent union. The union started an awareness campaign by organizing seminars and demonstrations and by contacting Dutch politicians with the aim of drawing their attention to Israeli atrocities in Palestine.

On November 29, 1980, the union successfully organized a festival which was attended by about 3,000 Arab and Dutch participants. The late Khaled Al-Hasan delivered a speech and the festival was considered the first of its kind in support of the Palestinian cause in the Netherlands. The festival was attended by many including Dutch politicians from different political sectors. This activity prodded Israeli pressure groups in the Netherlands to organize a demonstration in front of the hall where the festival was being held.

The success of the festival prompted central Palestinian labor unions and syndicates to establish Palestinian unions in the Netherlands for laborers, students and women as branches of the Palestinian unions that were set up in Lebanon and Syria. It seemed, at the time, that the formation of such unions was likely to push forward Palestinian action as the initiative seemed promising. A venue was inaugurated in Vlaardingen, where the majority of the community was living. There, more pro-Palestinian activities were organized until 1982, when the Palestinian resistance had to leave Lebanon, followed by the hideous massacres of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. The exodus of the Palestinian resistance from Lebanon, and the two massacres that followed, caused a wave of forced immigration of Palestinians from Lebanon towards Europe. The Netherlands was one of the countries which received a part of this wave.

Palestinian immigration raised the rate of enrollment in the various unions. This period had three main characteristics. The establishment of separate unions deprived the central Palestinian union of its role as a community leader. In addition, the high influx of new Palestinian immigrants, bringing with them the differences that mirrored political sensitivities and disputes in Lebanon, led to clashes among Palestinian activists. This period was also characterized by an

increase in PLO influence and activities in the community which sometimes had a negative impact due to the lack of understanding on the part of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) of the mechanisms of action in Dutch society.

During that period, the PLO Representative Office was opened in the Netherlands, but had no positive impact on the community. The newly established office was mainly concerned with recruiting as many Palestinians as possible, without any concern for positive action or resolution of differences. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Palestinian community office was closed, and all unions of students, laborers and women were shut down including the central Palestinian union in the Netherlands. As a result, Palestinian activities in the Netherlands once again became dependent on individual initiatives by resident Palestinians. A long period of inactivity prevailed in the Netherlands. The Palestinian Dutch Committee, being under no Palestinian influence, was the exception. However, as mentioned earlier, its effect on Dutch public opinion was minimal.

It is worth mentioning here that the Oslo Accords had a negative impact on collective Palestinian activities. On one hand, it weakened the political rationale behind Palestinian activists, and on the other, it led to a lack of interest on the part of the Palestinian leadership in the role of expatriate Palestinian communities including those in the Netherlands.

## **Number of Palestinians in the Netherlands**

The number of Palestinians in the Netherlands cannot be accurately measured due to the lack of statistics. Estimates on this matter vary considerably. It is certain, however, that the number of Palestinians in the town of Vlaardingen exceeds 1,000. Most are descendants of the old-comers who immigrated to the Netherlands in the early 1960s. Their number had naturally increased by marriage, family reunions and newcomers.

Palestinian presence, however, is not confined to Vlaardingen, but also includes other major Dutch cities. When the PLO relocated to Palestine in 1994, a substantial number of its employees in Tunisia chose to immigrate to Europe. In addition, a number of Palestinians immigrated to the Netherlands from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as from Jordan. All newcomers applied for political asylum, and those who were granted asylum remained in the country, whereas those denied that right were asked to leave.

Therefore, the actual number of Palestinians in the country is not precisely known, but is estimated to be around 10,000. The fact that the majority do not have Palestinian passports or identities and were registered under other nationalities, renders a precise census difficult.

Nevertheless, some sources put the number of members of the Palestinian community at around 7,000, hailing from various regions in Palestine since 1967, and belonging to all walks of life: laborers, peasants, students, engineers, physicians, artists, painters, writers and journalists.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Organizations**

#### **Working for the Palestinian Cause**

#### **Palestinian Organizations**

The inactivity of the Palestinian community continued until the end of the 1990s when new initiatives were taken to set up a framework representing the community in the Netherlands. The following four groups were established and competed for the leadership of the community:

##### **► Palestinian Community Association**

This association has no membership record and has not organized democratic elections since its inception. Its membership is restricted to Fateh supporters, and its ability to mobilize the community or affect local public opinion is limited. Its activities are focused on organizing events during certain Palestinian occasions that are attended by a small number of community members. At the Dutch level, the activity of this association is confined to participating in seminars and demonstrations which are organized by the Palestine Dutch Committee.

Moreover, the leaders of this association do not fluently speak Dutch and are not well acquainted with Dutch society and its way of thinking. In addition, the political leadership of the PLO wields much influence on its leadership so that the latter's ability to take any action is constrained. Such activities remain subject to manipulation by Palestinian leaders who are thousands of miles away and lack accurate information on the actual state of affairs in the Netherlands.

When examining the activities of the Palestinian Community Association in the Netherlands, one certainly should pinpoint the role the association should have played in bringing together members of the Palestinian community and strengthening social ties among them, as well as with Dutch society. This also includes the role it should have played in bridging the gap between the community's aspirations and the goals and objectives of the people in Palestine.



The first conference organized by the Palestinian Community Association was held in the city of Rotterdam. An administrative committee of seven members was elected and remained in office until 1999. The second conference, attended by people from all over the Netherlands, resulted in the election of a new administrative committee for the association which was entrusted with the responsibility of enhancing the community's status. In this context, the community's chairman held many meetings with Arab and Dutch societies known for their support and sympathy to the Palestinian cause. Meetings were also held with some Arab ambassadors in order to better acquaint them with the community and its members.

With the help of various NGO's, liaison between the community and Palestine was established, fulfilling the objective of bridging relations between Palestinians in the Diaspora and the homeland. In addition, the last conference encouraged some members of the community to open branches of the association in their places of residence. Few activities were planned especially during religious occasions like Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha.

On national occasions, the Palestinian community in the Netherlands played an important role in issuing statements explaining the Palestinian viewpoint. It was successful in monitoring and gauging Dutch reaction and in mobilizing public opinion in support of the Palestinian people's struggle. From day one of the second *Intifada* (uprising), which erupted in 2000, the community began organizing demonstrations, mostly in the city of The Hague, in front of the parliament as well as at the Israeli embassy in Rotterdam and in Maastricht in the south. The largest demonstration, however, took place in Amsterdam, organized in cooperation with a group of Arab and Dutch organizations supporting the Palestinian cause, where men and women of all ages participated.

The association had a conspicuous role at universities, where movies on Palestine were often shown, and discussions on the Palestinian cause were held, in addition to a number of interviews in the media. The community also organized cultural events, the most significant of which was a festival where the Palestinian folk poet, Abu Arab recited some of his popular poems. The Palestinian folk singing troupe Haneen also performed during Palestinian cultural events around the Netherlands. The latest activity of the community was its participation, in October 2004, in a festival held in Amsterdam, at the Oosterpark, in support of the Palestinian people. Before that, anniversary observation of the Sabra and Shatila massacres was held at The Hague, and a Palestinian Day was set up in Utrecht. The association also participated in activities organized by a group of more than seven societies supporting the Palestinian cause in the northern city of Groningen, where a delegation from Jabalia in the



Gaza Strip took part. The association also held meetings with the leaders of various Arab communities and societies with the aim of coordinating and consolidating common activities. The association has a well-prepared plan of action for the year 2005. (For the declaration of the formation of the Palestinian Community Association, refer to the appendix.)

#### ► **Palestinian Council**

The headquarters of this council is in the city of Utrecht. It has things in common with the association, except that membership in the council is not restricted to Fateh members. Members of the council present themselves as independents. However they are not very active or influential, and their activities are similar to those of the association. At the Dutch level, their activities resemble those organized by the Dutch left.

#### ► **Arab House**

This is a forum that was established by a Palestinian businessman in The Hague for Palestinian, Arab and Muslim intellectuals. However, its impact on Dutch public opinion has hardly been felt. Its activities are restricted to organizing seminars and inviting Palestinian and other Arab thinkers to give lectures. The audience of Arab House is relatively constant. They comprise mainly a few dozen Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims in addition to some Dutch sympathizers.

#### ► **Palestine Dutch Committee**

We must not overlook the prominent Palestine Dutch Committee. It was established after the 1967 war by a Dutch leftist group, which supports the Palestinian cause and is still active in support of the cause today. This committee belongs to the left, and has always presented and defended the Palestinian point of view. Despite its effect on Dutch public opinion, it was unable to win any significant numbers from the community over to the Palestinian side. However, it has been effective in raising awareness of the Palestinian cause among numerous political circles in the Netherlands. The committee continuously issues booklets and pamphlets on the Palestinian struggle, together with a periodical titled 'Sumood', which is issued in participation with the Belgian Palestine Committee.

### **Other Organizations**

#### ► **Institute for Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue**

This institute was established in the 1980s. A small number of Palestinians and Dutch Jews participate in its very limited activities. Strengthening personal relationships among its members was the main objective of the institute since its establishment.

### ► **Meet Your Enemy Institute**

Established in 2003, this institute adheres to the same agenda as the Institute for Jewish-Palestinian Dialogue. It has not engaged in any significant activities in favor of the Palestinian struggle. Its members concentrate in forging personal relationships among themselves through organizing orientation events.

### ► **Another Jewish Voice**

A few years ago, a Jewish organization calling itself Another Jewish Voice made its debut. It was established by a number of Dutch Jews, who refuse to accept Israel's monopoly of Jewish representation in the world. They criticize Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, and believe that the Palestinian people have the right to establish an independent state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It calls for the unification of Jerusalem as a capital of both Israel and Palestine. It also calls for finding a just solution for the Palestinian refugees, but gives no further details of its viewpoint regarding this issue. Distinguished Dutch figures who once occupied important positions, some of whom were ministers, belong to this organization. Ed van Thijn, former mayor of Amsterdam and former minister of the interior, and Heeti do Ankona, former minister of education and health, are members of this organization.

## **The Community's Internal Affairs**

As detailed earlier, the Palestinian community in the Netherlands is plagued by divisions and differences. The organizations and groups at the present have not been able to coordinate and join forces on the basis of a solid plan of action, with the objective of winning over Dutch public opinion and directing it towards supporting the struggle of the Palestinian people.

In spite of this prevailing rift, elements of strength in the Palestinian community in the Netherlands do exist. One of these is the coming of age of second and third generation Palestinians. These generations are expected to be more successful in addressing Dutch society, given their knowledge of Dutch and their higher degree of integration into the host society compared to the older generation. It is sad to note, however, that Palestinian organizations do not give enough attention to these emerging generations, nor do they direct any activities towards engaging their individuals in community activism. An exception to this prevailing attitude was the establishment by a group of Palestinian women of an Arabic school for Palestinian children for the purpose of teaching them Arabic and the history of the Palestinian cause. A few hundred children have enrolled in this school.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Arab and Islamic**

## **Communities in the Netherlands**

### **The Arab Community and its Bearing on the Palestinian Cause**

The Arab community in the Netherlands totals about 300,000, with Moroccan Arabs constituting the larger segment of this community. The Moroccan community, however, is plagued by a split over the political system in their country of origin. Opposition factions belong mainly to left-wing movements, which consider support of the Palestinian cause as one of their top priorities. Unfortunately, activities vis-à-vis Palestinian affairs are confined to celebrating certain occasions and organizing speech festivals. This is because the Moroccan community generally lacks trained activists and sufficient financial resources. Thus, their activities are mainly focused on opposing the political system in Morocco and on addressing the problems of assimilation into Dutch society, as required by the Dutch authorities.

The loyalists, on the other hand, adopt a positive stance toward the Palestinian cause, always participating in demonstrations in support of Palestine. This group, however, lacks the ability to effectively address Dutch public opinion regarding the Palestinian struggle. This is perhaps due to the Islamic nature of this group, which is often seen as different and alien to the majority of Dutch circles, from both the left and the right.

In addition to Moroccans, there is a large number of Iraqis who came to the Netherlands after the first Gulf war. They are estimated to be around 45,000 including a significant number of Kurds. However, the stance taken by members of the Iraqi community toward the Palestinian cause is ambivalent due to the belief that most Palestinians supported the ousted Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein. Despite this, one can find a number of Iraqis who are active and enthusiastic towards Palestinian events and are seen to take part in many of the Palestinian community's activities, as do some members of the Egyptian and Tunisian communities. The number of Somali Arabs has declined due to their departure for Britain, after having acquired Dutch nationality.

The overall feature that characterizes the Arab community in the Netherlands is its lack of strong organization and effective leadership. This is due to the fact that the majority is, naturally, preoccupied with daily affairs. The Arabs in the Netherlands generally face problems related to work, accommodation and education. Some of their children do not get the chance to pursue higher education and some even drop out of school at an early age. This has a negative impact on the influence of the community on Dutch society

### **The Islamic Community and its Bearing on the**

## **Palestinian Cause**

The number of Muslims in the Netherlands, whose overall population is around 16 million, is approximately one million, and there are more than 600 mosques around the country. The Islamic communities in the Netherlands are not much different from other Arab communities. The Turks form the majority, exceeding 300,000. Although the Palestinian cause is important to some in this community, it is not really a matter of major concern. The issues that interest this group are those of its internal affairs and its relationship with Dutch society. This community focuses its activities on building mosques and observing Islamic rituals. Its leaders tend to consider dealing with the Palestinian cause as a political activity that may lead to confrontation with Dutch authorities. They prefer, therefore, to remain distant. This stance became more evident after September 11, 2001. Other Muslims in the Netherlands, besides Turks, include Iranians, estimated to total 50,000 and 45,000 Afghans.

The relationship between the Islamic community and Dutch society was strained after the murder in 2004 of the Dutch filmmaker, Theo Van Gogh, who was an outspoken critic of Islam, by an extremist of Moroccan origin named Mohammad Boyri who is now serving a lifetime prison sentence. The incident sparked a wave of attacks on mosques and Islamic centers around the country. Samir Azizi, 22-years-old, was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of plotting attacks.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the Dutch government began to cut back on welfare programs that encourage immigrants to maintain strong links with their homelands.<sup>2</sup>

## **New Asylum Law**

The situation changed considerably after the ascension of right-wing parties to power. It has become extremely difficult, even virtually impossible, to obtain asylum in the Netherlands. This issue has become more complicated with the presence of the immigration minister, Rita Feiridonk, who is described by the Dutch, and not only refugees, as merciless. A comparison between the number of refugees in 2000 and 2005 sheds light on the new asylum law which has been decided on by the EU, and is threatening many asylum seekers with the possibility of being returned to their countries of origin, regardless of the political situations there. In 2000, more than 43,500 applicants requested asylum, but this number declined to 12,350 applications in 2005.

In 2005, asylum seekers in the Netherlands, as a percentage of the total applicants to European countries, was 6 per cent. In contrast France attracted 20 per cent, Britain 13 per cent and Germany 12 per cent. Refugees are placed in special camps, until a decision is made regarding their applications. In the past, this process used to take several months, but it now might require 10 years. On several occasions Dutch authorities returned Iranians, Iraqi Kurds and Arabs to Kurdistan on the pretext that conditions there were stable.<sup>3</sup>

## **Basis for Integration into Dutch Society**

In the period since September 11, the Dutch attitude on integration of its Arab and Turkish immigrant population (about 6 per cent of a total of 16 million) has gone from one of accommodation to an emphasis on requiring compatibility from resident Muslims.

The swing has been away from multicultural concessions to obligations that reject seemingly parallel societies. The basis for living in the Netherlands has been defined as accepting the primacy of the constitution, practical standards of engagement in society such as Dutch language competence, European notions relating to women's rights or homosexuality, and the cohesive value of work.<sup>4</sup>

## **Differential Treatment of Arabs and Muslims**

Abdul Salam bin Ali, a Moroccan who immigrated to the Netherlands in 1979 at the age of 23, said that his son was unable to get practical training because he is an immigrant. He adds: 'There is a lot of differential treatment. The Dutch children are separated from the foreign children. In the school near my home there are only foreign children. This is not normal.'<sup>5</sup>

In a country whose sense of tolerance is a historical fact rather than a cliché, the Dutch have reached what is nearly a consensus about integration of Muslim immigrants into their midst. The parties have changed their approach to insisting on demands for Muslims' compatibility and tighter immigration controls.

This also means a consensus that includes acknowledgment that much more democracy is needed in the hiring and the education of Muslims. Fritz Bolkestein, a former European Commission member, who began writing in the early 1990s about Islam as a challenge for Europe, indicated that the Dutch need a constitutional amendment ending religious schooling. 'Divided schooling leads to a divided country,' he said.<sup>6</sup>

## **Prohibition of the Veil**

In November 2006, the Dutch government passed a law prohibiting the wearing the veil in public places and all other forms of Islamic face cover. The government described its action as necessary for security reasons. The immigration minister, Rita Feirdonk, prepared a draft of one of the strictest laws governing face covering in Europe. In a country widely known as one of the most diverse and flexible in Europe, the Netherlands has become the first country to impose a total ban on Islamic face covering in all places, despite the fact that other countries prohibited face covers only in specific areas. Debates in Europe on whether Islamic veils and head covers hinders integration of Muslim communities in their host societies rages on.<sup>7</sup>

## **Chapter Four**

# **Dutch Parties and Their Stance Vis-à-Vis the Palestinian Cause**

## **Christian Democratic Party**

The present prime minister belongs to this party, which is the strongest in the Netherlands, and is currently in a coalition with the Liberal Party and the Democracy 66 Party. Christian Democrats represent the moderate right, which is a Protestant-Catholic gathering. Like most parties in the Netherlands, it is known for its support for Israel. However, some of its members distanced themselves from their parties' position and showed great support for the Palestinian people. Among them is the previous foreign minister and former European commissioner Hans van den Broeke. The policy of this party, however, reflects the U.S. administration's policy towards world affairs, including its policy towards the Middle East and, in particular, the Palestinian problem.

The platform of this party does not indicate any explicit stance regarding the Palestinian cause. Its general viewpoint on this matter can be inferred from the following statement the party once issued: 'The Israeli-Palestinian conflict may not be solved, although it is regarded as a growing international menace. The US, the UN, the EU and Russia (The Quartet) all work together in order to find a solution to this conflict. The Christian Democratic Party believes that Dutch and European policies must concentrate on supporting this initiative.'

According to the party, the responsibility of making decisions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue lies in the hands of other international powers. However, this party is largely supportive and sympathetic to Israel. A former Dutch UN High Commissioner for Refugees', Rud Rubbers, is a member of this party. He also held the position of prime minister for three consecutive terms.

## **Dutch Labor Party**

This party adopts a social-democratic approach representing the moderate left. The position taken by the party had been characterized in the past as extremely supportive of Israel. However, it has recently started to adopt more moderate views. In its political platform, this party now supports the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, living side by side with Israel. No transparent position has been taken by the party regarding the final borders of the Palestinian state, leaving this issue for final negotiations between the two parties. Some prominent members in the party, previously holding ministerial positions, declared their unequivocal support for the Palestinians' right for self-determination. Among those is Klass de Fries, former interior minister during the Labor government and UN Special Envoy for Darfur, Sudan Jan Pronk.



The Labor Party is considered the strongest opposition party. It is the second largest party in the Netherlands and plays an important role in Dutch politics. Most Dutch mayors belong to this party. Its youth organization has a more moderate stance regarding the Palestinian cause than that of the main party.

### **Liberal Party (VVD)**

This party is one of the most prominent right-wing parties and the most supportive of Israel. It is the third-largest party in the Netherlands and often aligns with strong parties to win a few ministerial seats. One of its members, Frans Weisglas, chairman of the Dutch parliament, is an ardent supporter of Israel and makes no secret of his enmity towards the Palestinian cause.

### **Green Left Party**

This party is a union between three former left-wing parties, namely the Social Pacifist Party, the Political Radical Party and the Dutch Communist Party. It has adopted favorable attitudes towards the Palestinian struggle and recognizes the right of the Palestinians to an independent state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip within the 1967 borders. The party has no obvious stance regarding the right of return of Palestinian refugees, however. It considers the right of return legal but not practical and does not serve to further the peace process. Many Palestinians and other Arabs belong to this party and take part in its activities.

### **Socialist Party**

This is a left-wing party, with Maoist origins. It has been able to win a few seats in parliament and is currently represented by eight MP's. This party is the most supportive of the Palestinian cause and considers Israel as an imperialist project and, therefore, does not recognize its existence. Although some changes in its position have been observed since its entry into parliament, it still remains the most sympathetic to the cause.

The remaining Dutch parties are minor and lean towards the right. Most of them sympathize with Israel.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Role of the Dutch Media**

#### **The Attitude of the Dutch Media towards the Palestinian Problem**

The Dutch media generally portrays Israel as a small state, surrounded and threatened by hostile and aggressive enemies. It also used to associate the

Palestinian resistance movement with terrorism. This point of view has changed since the first *Intifada*. At the time, the media, though in a limited manner, started publishing photographs showing Israeli persecution of Palestinians. However the Dutch media is still biased towards Israel, often justifying the crimes committed by the Israeli occupation, portraying them as acts of self-defense and as reactions to Palestinian attacks. It should be noted here that the majority of correspondents are either Jewish or married to Jews. Therefore, their reports are often inclined to favor Israel.

In contrast, Dutch filmmaker of Palestinian origin Hani Abu As'ad was the key guest at the international documentary film festival in Amsterdam in late 2005. His film, 'Paradise Now', won the Blue Angel and Amnesty International prizes at the Berlin Film Festival. The film, which chronicles the last 24 hours in the lives of two Palestinian friends who plan to blow themselves up in Tel Aviv, also won the prize for best foreign film at the Golden Globe awards in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

## Anti-Islam Film

Extreme right-wing parliamentarian Gerd Fildars, stirred chaos when he declared that he was working on an anti-Islam film, dealing with the Quran. Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende denounced all intimidation attempts and declared that the government will intervene if limits are exceeded.

Mohammad Al-Rabei, president of the Moroccan-Islamic societies, stressed the need for self-control and urged Islamic countries not to boycott Dutch products. He pointed out that Fildars would fail if no confrontation or encounters occurred and Muslims would prove that they are more intelligent and democratic than he might have thought.<sup>9</sup>

## Summary

The history of immigration of the Palestinian community to the Netherlands dates back to the early 1950s, the years which followed the Palestinian tragedy in 1948. At the time, a small number of students came to the country seeking both higher education and work. This group of students encountered difficult conditions, as well as a society which was sympathetic towards Israel and highly ignorant of the Palestinian *Nakba*.

After the June 1967 war, the Palestine Dutch Committee was formed by a group of Dutch leftists who were supportive of the Palestinian cause. Still active today, this committee, however, remains confined to the left-wing movement and, despite great efforts exerted by its members, could not force itself into the public sphere in the Netherlands.

In 1980 the Palestinian Union in the Netherlands was established, causing positive reactions within the local Palestinian community where many of its members enrolled in the nascent union. The union started an awareness campaign by organizing seminars and demonstrations, and by contacting Dutch politicians with the aim of drawing their

attention to Israeli atrocities in Palestine. A venue was inaugurated in Vlaardingen, where the majority of the community was living.

Palestinian immigrants, who poured into the Netherlands after the Sabra and Shatila massacres, brought with them the differences that reflected political sensitivities and disputes in Lebanon and led to clashes among Palestinian activists. As a result, Palestinian activities in the Netherlands once again became dependent on individual initiatives embraced by some resident Palestinians. A long period of inactivity in the Netherlands prevailed. The Palestinian Dutch Committee, being under no Palestinian influence, was the exception. However, its effect on Dutch public opinion was minimal.

Some sources put the number of members of the Palestinian community at around 7,000, hailing from various regions in Palestine since 1967, and belonging to all walks of life: laborers, peasants, students, engineers, physicians, artists, painters, writers and journalists.

The Arab community in the Netherlands totals about 300,000, with Moroccan Arabs constituting the largest segment of this community. There is also a large number of Iraqis who came to the Netherlands after the first Gulf war. They are estimated to be around 45,000 including a significant number of Kurds. In addition there are some Egyptians and Tunisians but the overall feature that characterizes the Arab community in the Netherlands is its lack of strong organization and effective leadership. This is due to the fact that the majority is preoccupied with daily affairs.

The number of Muslims in the Netherlands, whose population is around 16 million, is approximately one million, and there are more than 600 mosques around the country. The Islamic communities in the Netherlands are not much different from other Arab communities. The Turks form the majority, exceeding 300,000. Although the Palestinian cause is important to some in this community, it is not really of major concern.

The relationship between the Islamic community and Dutch society was strained after the murder in 2004 of the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh who was an outspoken critic of Islam, by an extremist of Moroccan origin named Mohammad Boyri who is now serving a lifetime prison sentence. The incident sparked a wave of attacks on mosques and Islamic centers around the country. Samir Azizi, 22-years-old, was sentenced to eight years in prison on charges of plotting attacks. In addition, the Dutch government began to cut back on welfare programs that encourage immigrants to maintain strong links with their homelands<sup>3</sup>.

The situation changed considerably after the ascension of the right-wing parties to power. It has become extremely hard, even virtually impossible, to get asylum in the Netherlands. This issue has become more complicated in the presence of the immigration minister, Rita Feiridonk, who is described by the Dutch, and not only the refugees, as merciless. A comparison between the number of refugees in 2000 and 2005 sheds light on the new asylum law, which has been concluded by the EU, and is threatening many asylum seekers with a return to their countries of origin, regardless of the political situations. In 2000, more than 43,500 applicants requested asylum, but this number declined to 12,350 applications in 2005.

In 2005 asylum seekers in the Netherlands, as a percentage of the total applicants to European countries, was 6 per cent. In contrast, France attracted 20 per cent, Britain 13

per cent and Germany 12 per cent. Refugees are placed in special camps until a decision is made regarding their applications. In the past, this process used to take several months, but it now might require ten years. On several occasions Dutch authorities returned Iranians, Iraqi Kurds and Arabs to Kurdistan on the pretext that conditions there were stable.

## **Appendix**

### **Declaration of the Formation of the Palestinian Community Association in the Netherlands**

- Considering the importance of organizing the Palestinian community in the Netherlands in a framework that safeguards its political, economic and cultural interests,
- And looking forward to making this community more effective and helpful in developing all aspects of life for Palestinians in this country,
- And looking forward to enabling the community to be a mass representative, defending the legal rights of our Palestinian People and our national cause,
- The community has decided to form this association to be a cradle for the Palestinian people living in the Netherlands.

### **Goals and Objectives:**

1. Serving the Palestinian community in the Netherlands and safeguarding its language and culture
2. Establishing loving and brotherly bridges between the Palestinian community and nurturing cooperation with members of other Arab communities
3. Safeguarding Arab and Palestinian identities among community members and building bridges of cooperation and friendship with the Dutch people and other communities
4. Building bridges among members of the Palestinian communities wherever they are located
5. Supporting the right of return of the Palestinian people to their homeland and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital
6. Fighting all forms of racism and extremism
7. Celebrating national and religious occasions of the Palestinian people
8. Teaching Arabic and Dutch to members of the Palestinian community
9. Calling for religious tolerance and dialogue, as well as respect for other cultures, and bringing about freedom of opinion amidst the circles of the Palestinian community in the Netherlands;
10. Building friendly and cooperative relations with all Arab and Dutch institutions

as well as with active groups who promote Arab affairs

11. Publishing a cultural and social periodical that caters to the Palestinian community's affairs in the Netherlands

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## Endnotes

- 1 Al-Rai newspaper, Thursday 14/12/2006
- 2 Taken from the website of the Washington-based National Public Radio  
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4170940>
- 3 Alhayat newspaper; Sunday 22/10/2006
- 4 International Herald Tribune; Tuesday 21/11/2006
- 5 Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, Wednesday 22/11/2006
- 6 International Herald Tribune. Tuesday 21/11/2006
- 7 Alhayat newspaper. Sunday 19/11/2006
- 8 From the website: <http://palestineblogs.com/archives/category/media>
- 9 Alhayat newspaper, Friday 25/11/2008