
Dutch Muslims to remain a minority

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The number of Muslims in the Netherlands is growing faster than the rest of the population. Extrapolating this trend, some believe that Muslims will constitute a majority of the Dutch population in the future. How realistic is this expectation? Based on projections of the future number of migrants, it is easy to calculate that Muslims will remain a minority in the future.

photo: Wim de Jonge



Not all migrants are Muslims

According to an estimate by Statistics Netherlands (NCBS) there were 857,000 Muslims living in the Netherlands, or five percent of the population, in 2006 (see Table 1). Most of them are non-Western migrants. Not all migrants are Muslims, however. Just under half of all non-Western migrants are Muslims. The percentage varies considerably depending on the migrants' country of origin. The three biggest groups of non-Western migrants in the Netherlands are people of Turkish, Surinamese or Moroccan descent. They are also the three biggest groups of Muslims, but whereas about 90 percent of Turks and Moroccans are Muslim, this is only the case among no more than about 10 percent of the Surinamese in the Netherlands. Whereas a clear majority of several groups of migrants

who came to the Netherlands as asylum seekers are Muslims, the percentages tend to be lower than the percentage of Muslims in their country of origin. Among many other groups of non-Western migrants the percentage of Muslims is very low.

The question whether the percentage of Muslims is set to increase in the future, and if so to what degree, will largely depend on the future number of non-Western migrants, and, given the strong variation in the percentage of Muslims, on the composition of the migrant population. Another important factor is the extent to which these people will abandon their faith. It remains to be seen whether second- and subsequent generation migrants will have an equally strong sense of being Muslim as the first generation. Conversely, part of the Muslim community might become more strongly

attached to their religion in the future, and non-Muslims might convert to Islam. However, as statements of this kind are highly speculative, this article will only address the possible consequences of changes in the numbers of migrants for the future number of Muslims.

Slowdown in growth of numbers of migrants

The extent to which the number of migrants is set to grow will depend on the size of immigration and emigration flows –some immigrants leave the Netherlands after a while– as well as on the average family size and mortality among migrants. As the migrant population tends to be relatively young, mortality plays less of a role in terms of their quantitative development than among the population of Dutch descent. The number of non-Western migrants climbed from 1.2 million in 1996 to 1.7 million in 2006, an increase of half a million people in ten year's time. This growth rate has slowed down considerably in recent years due to a strong increase in emigration and declining immigration. Net migration was even negative for some years: The number of migrants leaving the Netherlands exceeded the number of new immigrants.

Future immigration of a different kind

Statistics Netherlands does not expect that net emigration is here to stay as immigration is likely to increase again in the future. The main reason for this is the expected tight labour market in the Netherlands due to the ageing population. Many of the migrants settling in the Netherlands in the past decades came from Turkey and Morocco to rejoin their families or to marry. Another large group of migrants arrived as asylum seekers from the Middle East. Both these groups of immigrants consisted mostly of Muslims. Statistics Netherlands expects immigration from Turkey and Morocco to decline in the future as more and more young Moroccans and Turks are now marrying someone living in the Netherlands as well. This means that fewer migrants will look for a partner abroad. The number of asylum seekers has dropped sharply in recent years and is not expected to pick up again due to strict policies. Future immigration may differ from the past. The number of immigrants from eastern Europe has shown strong growth in recent years. And to the extent that immigrants will come from non-Western countries, there will be a shift towards migrants from populous Asian countries such as India and China. Only a small percentage of future immigrants are expected to come from Muslim countries and there are certainly no grounds to assume that the percentage of Muslims among future immigrants will be higher than it is now.

Migrants are having fewer children

The growing number of migrants results not only from immigration but also from natural increase. The group of second-generation migrants in the Netherlands is growing because the first generation are having children. Non-

Table 1. Number of migrants and Muslims in the Netherlands, 2006

	Number of people	Percentage Muslims	Number of Muslims
	x 1,000	%	x 1,000
Non-Western migrants	1,720	47	815
of which:			
Turks	365	87	318
Moroccans	323	92	297
Surinamese	332	10	33
Afghans	37	84	31
Iraqis	44	63	28
Somalis	20	95	19
Pakistanis	18	100	18
Iranians	29	43	12
Other countries of origin	552	11	58
Western migrants	1,428	3	38
Total population	16,334	5	857

Source: CBS, Statline; Van Herten (2007).

Western migrants have larger families, on average, than people of Dutch descent, but their families have become smaller in the past ten years. Statistics Netherlands expects that the number of migrant children will continue to decline gradually in the next decades, to an average of two children per woman, in part as a result of the fact that birth rates are also declining in their countries of origin.

Muslims to remain a minority

Statistics Netherlands expects that the number of non-Western migrants will increase from 1.7 million to 2.7 million in 2050, based on the

Table 2. Number of Muslims in 2050

	Percentage Muslims	Number of migrants	Number of Muslims	Percentage Muslims in total population
	%	x 1,000	x 1,000	%
<i>Scenario 1: constant percentage Muslims</i>				
Non-Western migrants	47	2,691	1,276	7.6
Western migrants	3	2,105	63	0.4
Total Muslims			1,339	8.0
<i>Scenario 2: strong growth number of migrants</i>				
Non-Western migrants	47	4,324	2,050	11.1
Western migrants	3	2,405	72	0.4
Total Muslims			2,122	11.5
<i>Scenario 3: strong growth percentage Muslims</i>				
Migrants from Africa, Asia and Turkey	100	4,339	4,339	23.5
Surinamese	10	656	66	0.4
Western migrants	3	2,885	87	0.5
Total Muslims			4,491	24.4

assumption of net immigration and a gradually declining family size among migrants. The total population of the Netherlands is set to increase from 16.3 million to 16.8 million in the same period. This means an increase in the percentage of non-Western migrants from 11 to 16 percent. Given, however, that not all non-Western migrants are Muslims, we expect only a slight increase in the percentage of Muslims in the Netherlands.

Assuming that the percentage of Muslims among Western and non-Western migrants will remain unchanged during the coming decades, the percentage of Muslims in the total population would increase from five percent in 2006 to eight percent in 2050 (scenario 1 in Table 2). This percentage may be even lower given the expectation that, as indicated above, the percentage of Muslims among future immigrants will be lower than it was in the past. The percentage may also decline as Muslims abandon their faith.

Conversely, the percentage of Muslims could increase if immigration and the future number

of children among Muslims exceeds expectations. Statistics Netherlands has calculated the extent to which the number of migrants would increase assuming much higher migration and birth rates. Under this scenario, the percentage of Muslims would increase to over 11 percent (scenario 2 in Table 2), which would be double the current percentage but still a small minority of the total population.

If we were also to assume that all migrants from Africa and Asia will be Muslims, the proportion of Muslims in the Netherlands would amount to 24 percent in 2050 (scenario 3 in Table 2). And whereas this is substantially more than it is now, Muslims would still constitute a minority in the Netherlands under this extreme scenario.

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