

Fitna the Movie: **A Case Study**

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Background

This paper discusses Geert Wilders, the film *Fitna*, and the global reactions followed. *Fitna* is essentially a 15 minute film which features graphic images of terrorists attacks and death threats by Muslim radicals combined with five verses from the Qur'an (Crouch, 2008b). It also features some inflammatory speeches from radical Muslims to attack non-believers (The Associated Press, 2008b). The film has two versions, English and Dutch, and first published on a video sharing website, LiveLeak.

Geert Wilders

Geert Wilders was born on September 6, 1963 in the Limburg town of Venlo, Netherlands. He was raised as a Roman Catholic and went to a Catholic secondary school. However, he is no longer religious (Crouch, 2008a). He is nicknamed 'Mozart' because of his bleached platinum blond hair and in 2007 he was voted as the politician of the year by the Dutch political press because he was not only famous among journalists, but he also scores highly in public polls (Kirby, 2008).

In 1990, after working in the health insurance industry, Wilders worked as a parliamentary assistant to Frits Bolkestein, a Dutch politician and former European Commissioner. Seven years later, he was elected for the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) to the municipal council of Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands. A year later, he won a seat at the election on the national level and become a member of Dutch parliament. Wilders then left the VVD in 2002 mainly because he opposed the VVD decision to support the accession of Turkey into the European Union (EU) (Kirby, 2008). He then created his own party, Party for Freedom (PVV).

Wilders, according to Bart Jan Spruyt (as cited in Kirby, 2008), a conservative Dutch television presenter, is a very talented politician who knows how to use the media and

influence public debate. This helps us understand how Wilders was named politician of the year in 2007. He is also famous for his consistent political views. Wilders is widely known as a supporter of the free market. He is also a vocal advocate for unrestricted freedom of speech, minimal government interference, and opposed to multicultural relativism. He also champions the restriction of immigration to the Netherlands, particularly from non-Western countries.

According to Cassuto (as cited in Hellman and Cassuto, 2008), Wilders assumed the role of the most vocal and prominent Islamic critic in the Netherlands after politician Ayan Hirsi Ali went to the US following the murders of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn and filmmaker Theo van Gogh. His supporters believe that he is in fact defending the Dutch traditional values and laws which are in fundamental conflict with Islam (Crouch, 2008a; Murray, 2008). Wilders, referring to the increased population of Muslims in the Netherlands, states, '[t]ake a walk down the street and see where this is going. You no longer feel like you are living in your own country. There is a battle going on and we have to defend ourselves. Before you know it there will be more mosques than churches!' (Expatica, 2007).

Wilders once implored Muslim migrants to 'tear out half of the Qur'an if they wished to stay in the Netherlands' (Burke, 2008) because the Qur'an contains 'terrible things' (CNN, 2008b). He also asserted that if the Prophet Muhammad was alive, he would be 'treated as a war criminal, being sent out of the country, being sent to jail' (Crouch, 2008a). These statements caused strong reactions in Muslim countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. In a letter to the Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant* on August 9, 2007, Wilders equates the Qur'an with Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and labeled it a 'fascist book', and suggesting that it should be banned in the Netherlands (Crouch, 2008a). He further states that '[t]he book incites hatred and killing and therefore has no place in our legal order' and suggests that the Qur'an should only be permitted for academic research (den Boer, 2007).

On August 15, 2007, a representative of the Prosecutors' Office in Amsterdam declared that 'dozens of reports' were made against Wilders and all were being considered. Because of Wilders' strong views against Islam and after the assassination of Theo van Gogh, security measures were deemed necessary (Burke, 2008). Following his decision to produce and released *Fitna*, Wilders continuously received death threats and lives under constant police protection (BBC News, 2008b; Crouch, 2008a).

Fitna the Movie

Fitna is a short film that, according to Wilders (as cited in Burke, 2008), explores the Qur'an as the source for terrorism and universalism in Islam. Furthermore, it attempts to depict Islam as it exists in the Netherlands. Wilders suggests that the film demonstrates the fact that the Qur'an is the 'source of inspiration for intolerance, murder, and terror.' His main motivation in producing and releasing *Fitna* is to validate his view that Islam and the Qur'an are essentially a part of a wider fascist ideology that ultimately threatens everything that is held to be sacred in modern Western democracy (Smith, 2008). Through *Fitna*, Wilders attempts to portray Islam and freedom of speech and expression as irreconcilable (Crouch, 2008a). Furthermore, he argues that the 'Islamisation' of the Netherlands and the West in general must be stopped (Crouch, 2008b; Hellman and Cassuto, 2008).

Before the release of *Fitna* on the internet on March 27, 2008 Wilders' attempts to persuade Dutch television networks to broadcast the film failed (Crouch, 2008a; Economist, 2008). According to *De Volskrant* newspaper (as cited in Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2008b), no local broadcaster was willing to show the film. Initially, however, Nova, a publicly funded broadcasting channel, agreed to air the film. The agreement was then cancelled because such decision could imply that the government endorsed the project whilst the government wishes the opposite (Burke, 2008). Despite the decision by Dutch broadcasters not to air the film, Wilders insisted on the film's showing and decided to release it on the Internet (Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2008b).

Prior to the release, Dutch authorities and political leaders warned Wilders of the possible consequences of releasing the film. The government also held a series of crisis meetings and asked the counter-terrorist services to establish a security plan (Burke, 2008). Maxime Verhagen, the Dutch foreign minister pointed out that it is irresponsible to broadcast the film because it poses a threat to the Dutch economy, and Dutch soldiers and residents could be in danger (Crouch, 2008a; Kirby, 2008; Scimone, 2008; Smith, 2008). Such statements clearly indicate that the Dutch was fearful of violent protests by Muslims around the globe as had been witnessed following the publication of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons (The Associated Press, 2008d; de Vette, 2008). Wilders then responded by stating that if Mr. Verhagen's fear is to be proven, it confirms the notion that Islam is indeed a rigid, intolerant religion that is incapable of facing criticism with non-violent measures (Crouch, 2008a)

The film uses Westergaard's Bomb in the Turban cartoon in its opening and closing sequences. At the beginning of the film the fuse connected to the bomb is long but lit. The image is accompanied by the sound of a clock ticking with a timer counting down from 15 minutes on the right hand side of the screen. Wilders is metaphorically describing Islam itself as a danger that threatens to erupt in short order.

The film started with an English translation of the *surah Al-Anfal* verse 60 that states, '[p]repare for them whatever force and cavalry ye are able of gathering...To strike terror...To strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah and your enemies.' The scene then moved to graphic footage from the 9/11 attack, the terrorist train bombings in Madrid in March 2004, and the London Underground in July 2005 (BBC News, 2008a). The images are also accompanied by taped conversations made during the attacks followed by inflammatory speeches by *Imams* that encourage the killing of non-believers. These scenes promote the belief that radical Muslims are carrying out violent actions which they are ordered to deliver. The basis of these orders rests in the very teaching of the Qur'an itself. The film also suggests that Islamic extremists would not exist if the Qur'an's violent verses did not exist (Ellian, 2008).

Another four quotations from the Qur'an come from the *surah An-Nisa* verse 56, the *surah Muhammad* verse 4, the *surah An-Nisa* verse 89, and the *surah Al-Anfal* verse 39. All four quotations are then combined with images showing *Imams* inciting hatred toward non-Muslims. Wilders also shows some media clippings from leading newspapers headlining the assassination of Theo van Gogh, death threats to Salman Rushdie, Ayan Hirsi Ali and Wilders himself, some footage from media interviews, and statistics demonstrating the increasing number of Muslims in the Netherlands and Europe.

Wilders also included images from various Muslim demonstrations whereby Muslim protesters were carrying signs warning that we should 'be prepared for the real holocaust', 'God bless Hitler,' and 'freedom, go to hell'. He incorporates the video of a three-and-a-half year old Bhasmallah who says that Jews are 'apes' and 'pigs' and that she learned this from the Qur'an. Wilders also shows an artist's illustration of Mohammed Bouyeri, the man who killed Theo van Gogh. The image is accompanied by Bouyeri's taped statements to make his point that radical Muslims take pride in honour killings and do not feel any regret in committing such acts.

In the last part of *Fitna*, Wilders shifts attention to the Netherlands. He shows images of mosques in the Netherlands and Muslims running errands in their traditional clothes. Wilders wants to demonstrate the incompatibility between Islam and the West by referring to issues such as adultery and gay relationships. To make his point, Wilders incorporates images of blindfolded hostages with Muslim men in the background and shows the text 'the Netherlands in the future?' The point if this, of course, is to portray gays as hostages to Muslim extremism. He also includes scenes with children covered in blood, women being circumcised, and women killings in Islamic world.

Toward the end Wilders shows the image of someone gesturing that they are about to tear a page out of the Qur'an. The screen then goes black but there remains the sound of paper being torn. Following this scene, there is a text,

[t]he sound you heard was a page being removed from the phonebook. For it is not up to me but to Muslims themselves to tear out the hateful verses from the Qur'an. Muslims want you to make way for Islam, but Islam does not make way for you. The government insists that you respect Islam, but Islam has no respect for you. Islam

wants to rule, submit and seeks to destroy our Western civilization. In 1945, Nazism was defeated in Europe. In 1989, communism was defeated in Europe. Now, the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation. Defend our freedom (Pimpernel, 2008)

The film concludes with the image of Westergaard's cartoon with the camera zooming onto the fuse which is almost exhausted. The image is accompanied by ticking sounds signifying that time are running short. The film ends with the bomb finally exploding.

Issues Raised and Global Reactions

The film, has raised a considerable debate on the limit of freedom of speech and its relationship with national security (de Vette, 2008). Furthermore, Clark (2008) points out that the film addresses issues other politicians are reluctant to talk about, that is, the issue of Islam and integration. However, the serious threat to staff members that followed the release of *Fitna* on LiveLeak forced LiveLeak to drop the film until appropriate security measures were taken (CNN, 2008a; Claburn, 2008).

Jan Peter Balkenende, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands said in an official statement that '[t]he film equates Islam with violence; we reject that interpretation. We believe it serves no purpose other than to offend' (Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2008a; Crouch, 2008b). To avoid a recurrence of the violence that followed the *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, the Dutch government carried out a public relations campaign to distance itself from Wilders views and his film while reminding people that the Netherlands guarantees freedom of speech and expression (Crouch, 2008b; Mika, 2008; The Associated Press, 2008d).

Sheikh *Imam* Fawar Jneid who is featured in the film, sued Wilders for EUR 55,000 claiming that the film has damaged his reputation. Responding to Jneid, Wilders argues that 'the world has turned upside down' because Jneid is widely known for his negative comments on Ayan Hirsi Ali and the late Theo van Gogh (Expatica, 2008b). Dutch Muslim leaders however, appealed for calm and asked Muslims worldwide not to harm

Dutch interests. In the same time, the Dutch Islamic Federation took legal action to try to stop Wilders from comparing Islam to fascism. Such responses were respectfully recognised by the Dutch Prime Minister as a demonstration of necessary calm expressed by various Dutch Muslim organisations (Mika, 2008).

Although the film and many of Wilders' comments regarding Islam were hurtful and insulting, the Dutch authorities decided that his conduct was not criminal. According to Dutch law, Wilders is protected by the right of free speech and so no charges will be made against him (CBC News, 2008; The Associated Press, 2008c). Shortly after, Wilders announced that he was planning a sequel to *Fitna* (Reuters, 2008a).

Prior to the release of *Fitna*, on February 13, 2008, Arab states attending the EU-Arab League meeting in Malta lobbied the Dutch government against the showing of *Fitna*. In response, the Dutch government underlined that freedom of speech is guaranteed by the Dutch Constitution and so the government cannot and would not intervene. The case, nevertheless, could be brought before Dutch courts on the grounds of inciting racial hatred or discrimination (Expatica, 2008a).

The 57 members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) responded to *Fitna* by declaring it as a blasphemous (Claburn, 2008) and a deliberate effort to incite and provoke social and religious instability. *Fitna*, according to OIC (as cited in Mika, 2008), promotes intolerance among people with different religious beliefs and is therefore a genuine threat to world peace. In its statement, the OIC asked the Dutch government to prosecute Wilders according to the Dutch law (CNN, 2008b).

Three UN Special Rapporteurs issued a joint statement condemning the distorted vision and irresponsibility of the film. They also called for dialogue and a vigilant response (United Nations, 2008). Similarly, Louise Arbour, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, states that the film is 'hateful' whilst the U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon criticised the film as 'offensively anti-Islamic' (Mika, 2008). According to Ban Ki-Moon,

[t]here is no justification for hate speech or incitement to violence. The right of free expression is not at stake here. I acknowledge the efforts of the Government of the Netherlands to stop the broadcast of this film, and appeal for calm to those understandably offended by it. Freedom must always be accompanied by social responsibility (Ban Ki-Moon, 2008).

A similar opinion is shared among the EU foreign ministers who condemned the showing of *Fitna*. The ministers argue that the film equates Islam with violence and that any such notion is clearly objectionable. The ministers also underlined that freedom of speech should be exercised with respect of the beliefs and convictions of others (European Social Policy, 2008). However, the EU clearly supported the Dutch government's decision to respect Wilders' right of free speech despite the fact that they do not share the same view (The Associated Press, 2008d).

Kurt Westergaard, the Danish illustrator who drew the Bomb in the Turban cartoon objected to the use of his drawing and was planning to file a lawsuit against Wilders for using his drawing without permission (Claburn, 2008; Clark, 2008). Additionally, Westergaard felt that the cartoon was employed out of context and demanded to have it removed (Mika, 2008). Unfortunately the cartoon is still very much integrated within the film.

In Pakistan, the Pakistani authorities blocked *YouTube* as a response to the wide-spread rumor that the trailer of *Fitna* could be accessed and downloaded from *YouTube* (Scimone, 2008; The Associated Press, 2008b; CNN, 2008a). Shortly after the release of *Fitna*, hundreds of Muslims demonstrated in Pakistan. They also burned the Dutch flag and demanded the Pakistani government to cut ties with the Netherlands (CNN, 2008b).

Similarly, Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation condemned the film and considering it to be an 'insult to Islam, hidden under the cover of freedom and expression' (Mika, 2008). The President of Republic of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, also banned the screening of *Fitna*. The Ministry of Information and Communications asked *Google* to remove the content from *YouTube* (The Associated Press, 2008b; Jones, 2008). Later on, the Ministry of Information and Communications

sent out letters to the internet service providers (ISPs) throughout the country to block websites in which the film could be accessed (Kompas, 2008; Rochadiat, 2008). The government argues that *Fitna* has threatened the inter-faith relationship and could cause inter-civilisation disharmony at a global level (Wahono, 2008a). As a result, *YouTube*, *RapidShare*, and social networking sites such as *Multiply* and *MySpace* were temporarily blocked. However, due to public pressure and complaints on censorship (Wahono, 2008b), access to *YouTube* and other sites was restored and the government issued an apology to the public (Putra, 2008; Conneally, 2008). There was also a demonstration in protest against *Fitna* and the gate at the office of the Dutch consulate in Medan was torn down (CNN, 2008b). According to an ANTARA report (ANTARA News, 2008), the Indonesian government also barred Wilders from entering Indonesia.

In Yemen, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Guidance, Hamoud al-Hitar, has formally asked the Dutch government to ban *Fitna*. It is important, states al-Hitar, to prevent defamation against any religion and its sacred symbols at an international level. He also points out that such efforts must be well coordinated to help prevent tensions (NewsYemen, 2008).

In Jordan, Wilders has been charged with blasphemy and contempt of Islam by a Jordan prosecutor and could face up to three years in prison. The prosecutor demanded he stand trial in Jordan and an order was issued through the Dutch embassy in Amman in an attempt to bring Wilders before a Jordanian court. This case, according to Wilders (as cited in Reuters, 2008b), could limit his freedom to travel.

Saudi Arabia also considered the film provocative, inaccurate, and consisting entirely of incorrect allegations that could incite hatred toward Muslims (Mika, 2008). The Iranian government, meanwhile, called the publication of *Fitna* blasphemous, anti-Islamic, and had the potential to cause grave consequences (Gartrell, 2008; Agence France-Presse, 2008a). Students demonstrated outside the Dutch embassy in Tehran and demanded the dismissal of the Dutch ambassador from Iran (Agence France-Presse, 2008b). Iran also

suggested a boycott Dutch products (Ellian, 2008), a suggestion supported by former Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohammad.

The Australian government, represented by Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, characterised *Fitna* as 'highly offensive'. Furthermore, Mr. Smith appealed for a calm and responsible response (Gartrell, 2008). In Denmark, on the other hand, a Danish press freedom group invited Wilder to talk about *Fitna* in the context of free speech and that any such invitation should not be misconstrued as a provocation against Muslims (The Associated Press, 2008a)

Discussion

Throughout this body of research, evidence is largely assembled from the film *Fitna*, documents and archival records such as articles published in mass media, and previous studies. I argue that freedom of speech and expression, just like any other form of liberty, is limited by respect for the rights of others. It should not harm and violate the beliefs of others, thus certain restraints on freedom of speech and expression is necessary and inevitable. Therefore, I believe that any opinion should be expressed with certain cultural sensitivities. Geert Wilders in the case of *Fitna* has indeed rejected pluralism and multiculturalism, denied the rights and beliefs of others and has abused his right to freedom of speech and expression by publishing *Fitna*.

Mass media has proven itself as a powerful medium, together with the advancement of technology and the wide acceptance of market ideology, media has multiplied its power that can be both positive and negative. Globalization has brought to the fore new opportunities and challenges that have global reach and impact for the media to deal with.

Over centuries, the relationship between Islam and the West has been complex and difficult. Following the 9/11 attack such relationship one again forced into spotlight. Global media coverage post 9/11 has been focusing largely on issues such as Muslims'

fundamentalism and the presupposed incompatibility between Islamic civilization and Western civilization. By reflecting to the previous cases such as the Rushdie Affair, the assassination of Theo van Gogh and *Jylands-Posten* cartoons controversy, there are unresolved problems concerning Islam and the West. In this global age we are continuously being challenged by the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality. However, as this research has point out, it is not only empirically wrong but also psychologically troubling and strategically counterproductive to perceive the world from an ‘us versus them’ perspective.

As this paper suggests, the media holds the power to bring together a plurality of different religions, traditions and ethnic groups. We are capable to diffuse our views and opinions around the globe more than ever before. The Internet in this respect has open new possibilities for everyone to seize. Geert Wilders, as a media savvy politician, take the opportunity and publish *Fitna*. Cyberspace, as Wilders demonstrated is an effective conduit to exercise his right of freedom of expression. Through the Internet, *Fitna* has been distributed around the globe and reach a large number of audiences.

Wilders, in this respect, perceived Muslims’ objections to the publication of *Fitna* as an evident of Muslims’ incapability to integrate to modernity. Negative responses – including violent reactions- are interpreted as Muslims’ failure to comprehend the importance of freedom of speech, one of the most respected values in any democratic society. The distance between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is simply too wide, thus it is naïve to believe that genuine dialogue and co-existence is possible. These were Wilders’ reasoning in producing and publishing *Fitna*; an effort to withdraw himself from multicultural society and argues that he is in fact defending the Dutch national and historical values. The publication of *Fitna*, nevertheless, has created an opportunity for us to learn the need to ‘listen’ to other voices from other social, political and cultural backgrounds.

Freedom of expression is recognized as one of our most basic rights and should be exercised with respect to the rights of others. Such liberty should be valued in equal

importance to other rights. It is just as valuable as religious freedom. Both forms of liberties should not be perceived as a *zero sum* and should not outweigh one another. As democratic society championed freedom of expression and religious freedom, it is equally important to exercise it responsibly with respect to others. Adjacent to the growing evidence of capital and labour mobility across borders, reciprocal dialogue and continuous negotiation within society should be endorsed at all times. Public education on how to respond to such intricate situations is vital and space for discussion must be left open.

The ubiquity of media, particularly with the rapid growth of the Internet has significantly augmented our opportunity to exercise our basic rights to express, criticize, argue and diffuse views and opinions. The media ethics could provide a set of standards, provide guidelines on how the media should ideally function and operate. Such a code should incorporate multicultural concerns as demanded by liberal principles and adopt structural pluralization to further create freedom, equity, plurality and social responsibility. It is worth noting that in most systems, media codes of ethics are basically self-regulating and very difficult to police. However, I argue that the creation and reinforcement of media codes of ethics both in national scope and international level is paramount. In order to develop a democratic and responsible media environment for all, nonetheless, further research should be conducted on issues such as how to create an international code of media ethics, how to create means to reinforce such ethical standards where sanctions should be considered, as well as the nature and extent to which restraint should be imposed.

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