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Why are people protesting Holocaust memorials in Holland and Belgium?

By Cnaan Liphshiz

JTA (23.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2EIWesl> - Nearly 20 years ago, Amersfoort commemorated its 333 Holocaust victims with a beautiful and unusual object — a Torah-style scroll listing all their names along with the date and place of their deaths.

The scroll, a gift from the central Netherlands city's Council of Churches to the municipality, was unveiled in a ceremony attended by then-Mayor Annie Brouwer in April 1999. Her speech acknowledged the victims' suffering.

But according to information revealed last week, Brouwer and others in the city subsequently refused to display the item, offering to put it in the city archives. It remains there today, inaccessible to the public.

The city took issue with how the scroll lists only Jews, the De Stadbron newspaper reported this month, triggering an outcry.

Far from an isolated incident, the controversy unfolding in Amersfoort is symptomatic of a larger issue in the Netherlands and Belgium. There, Holocaust commemoration initiatives in recent years have been met with mounting resistance, despite significant grassroots interest in the genocide.

The phenomenon is becoming particularly common in the Netherlands, which unlike its neighbors never officially apologized for the role of its civil servants and some citizens in the murder of 75 percent of its prewar Jewish population of 140,000 — the highest death toll in Nazi-occupied Western Europe.

In 2013, the Dutch Railway Museum in Utrecht unsuccessfully fought the erection of a statue outside its doors commemorating the 1,224 local Jews who were sent to their deaths aboard national rail cars.

In Amsterdam, dozens of artists this month signed a petition opposing the erection of a national monument in the this capital city's former Jewish quarter. Many current residents object to the memorial's prominent footprint.

Even tiny monuments the size of postcards raise objections.

Last year, an Amsterdam couple sued the city over memorial plaques embedded in the curb outside their home that commemorate the Jews who once lived there. Following a

backlash, they finally dropped their lawsuit, in which they said the objects “compromise the atmosphere” of their upscale street.

And in May, an Amsterdam bookshop owner said that a police officer asked him to remove a sign commemorating Holocaust victims, citing Israel’s actions.

Meanwhile, in the Belgian city of Antwerp, the municipality moved its main Holocaust monument from a place where victims were rounded up to another part of the city with less traffic, ignoring the protests of local Jews.

To Leon de Winter, the son of Holocaust survivors and one of Holland’s best-known writers, objections to Holocaust memorials are the result of “the need to suppress a sense of guilt for the massive collaboration” with the Nazis, coupled with “fatigue from hearing about the fate of the Jews.”

By contrast, Ronny Naftaniel, the executive vice chair of CEJI, a Brussels-based Jewish organization promoting tolerance through education, attributes them to “a misguided reluctance to set apart Jews, and a desire to view them merely as Dutch citizens, though this of course discriminates against them because they and the Roma alone were selected for annihilation as Jews and Gypsies – precisely not as Dutchmen.”

Naftaniel, a former director of the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel, cited the fact that to this day, Jews are not explicitly named in the national memorial ceremony on May 4, even though they constitute half of all Dutch casualties during World War II. The ceremony’s official language speaks only of Dutch people who were persecuted for their ethnicity.

To many in Holland, the fight against the erection of the national commemoration monument in Amsterdam symbolizes the problem. The \$6 million project features a metal labyrinth designed by the renowned American architect Daniel Libeskind. Its 9-foot metal walls bears the names of approximately 102,000 Holocaust victims.

But last week, newspapers published a petition signed by 54 locals, including some Jews, who oppose the plan. They insist it will mean “the disappearance of the already scarce greenery” from the street that the city set aside for the monument. The critics say they favor commemorating the Holocaust in principle, but the city has not consulted the community and other citizens on the design.

Naftaniel supports the idea of the national monument, but he nonetheless says the that its critics have a point.

“It’s a very prominent monument, and that’s appropriate given the magnitude of the crime,” he said. “But not wanting a colossus like that in your backyard isn’t necessarily the result of insensitivity.”

Jacques Grishaver, chairman of the Dutch Auschwitz Committee and the monument’s initiator, says the issue goes far deeper than a dispute over local land use.

“Residents living in houses where my family used to live don’t wish to see a monument commemorating them. They want to erase their names,” he said in a speech in July.

Separately, in recent years the Netherlands has seen another new phenomenon: the commemoration of soldiers who fought for Adolf Hitler, including SS officers.

In 2012 at the national commemoration in Amsterdam, organizers invited a 15-year-old boy to read a poem in memory of his namesake, a relative who had joined the SS. The invitation was rescinded amid a row between the Jewish community and organizers.

Several Dutch towns also commemorate fallen German soldiers on May 4. In 2012, following protests, the town of Geffen dropped plans for a monument that would have included Jewish victims and German war dead on the same slab of stone.

To Manfred Gerstenfeld, an Israeli scholar on anti-Semitism who has written extensively on Holland, where he grew up, these issues and the absence of an apology are part of how Holland "refuses to admit its guilt toward the Jews," he wrote in 2014 in an op-ed in The Jerusalem Post.

The Netherlands has 5,669 Righteous Among the Nations – non-Jews recognized by Israel for having risked their lives to save Jews from the Holocaust. It's by far the highest figure in Western Europe and the second highest worldwide, second only to Poland's 6,863 rescuers.

The kingdom also had a fierce resistance movement and with the 1942 February Strike, it became the scene of the first incident of mass public disobedience over the persecution of the Jews.

But it was also a country where the Nazi annihilation of the Jews reached record efficiency with the help of local collaborators.

Soon after the Nazis invaded in 1940, men from a group known as the Henneicke Column began hunting Jews for pay. Led by a cabbie named Wim Henneicke, authorities paid some 80 bounty hunters the equivalent of a week's pay for every Jew they brought in. This group alone caught thousands of victims.

Anne Frank, the teenager whose diary became one of the world's best-known testimonies from the Holocaust, and her family may have been betrayed by Nazi collaborators.

Yet despite this record — or perhaps because of — interest in the Holocaust remains high in the Netherlands.

Awareness of the genocide has only grown in recent years, giving rise to grassroots initiatives like Open Jewish Houses, where homeowners open to the public the former abodes of Holocaust victims who resided there.

This year's best-watched local film production was a drama about the real-life story of resistance hero Walraven van Hall, whose heroism was in the film rooted in the persecution of Jews.

But even this film is symptomatic of Dutch society's "unresolved issue" with the Holocaust, says de Winter, the writer.

"Yes, Holocaust stories are popular in the Netherlands," he told JTA, "but only if they're polished, cleansed and bleached of the massive guilt this country has yet to come to terms with."

The Netherlands introduces burqa ban in some public spaces

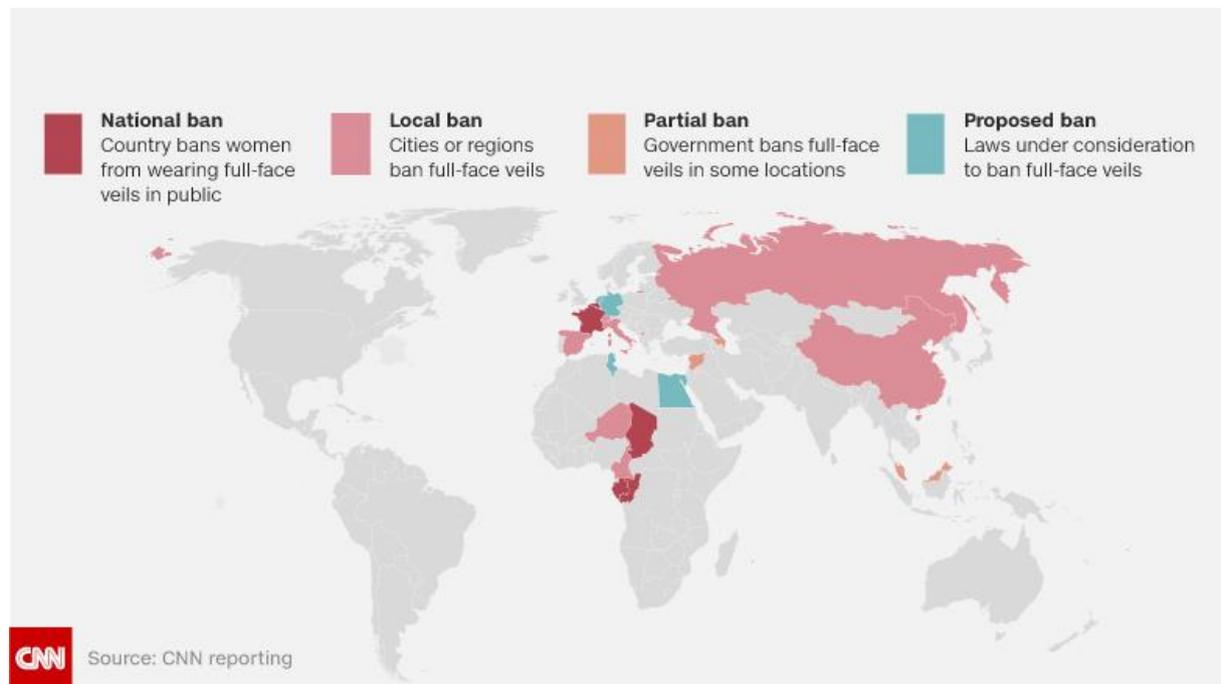
By Stephanie Halasz and Sheena McKenzie

CNN (27.06.2018) - <https://cnn.it/2u1aowD> - The Netherlands on Tuesday became the latest European country to introduce a ban on face-covering veils in some public spaces.

The Dutch Upper House of Parliament passed a law banning face coverings, including burqas and niqabs, in public spaces such as schools, hospitals, public transport and government buildings.

However, it does not apply to public streets.

The new ban applies to all face-covering clothing, such as motor helmets and ski masks. But it does not include headscarves, as the face is still visible.



A niqab is a head and face covering, which has an opening so the wearer's eyes are visible. A burqa is similar, but also features a mesh covering over the eyes.

The new law was passed by 40 votes to 35, Upper House press officer Gert Riphagen told CNN.

He estimated there were between 200 and 400 burqa or niqab-wearing people in the Netherlands, out of a population of roughly 17 million.

Proponents of the law say it will improve safety by making people more easily identifiable. Far-right Freedom Party politician Geert Wilders, who has campaigned heavily for the ban, was quick to praise the decision.

"Finally, 13 years after a majority in the Dutch Parliament voted in favor of my motion to ban the burqa, it became law yesterday!" he said in a tweet, along with the hashtags #stopislam #deislamize #freedom

Critics, such as Annelies Moors, professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, warn it could dissuade some women from entering public spaces, including schools.

The law follows similar bans in France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland.

In 2016, Cannes, a city on the French Riviera famous for its annual film festival, even went as far as to temporarily ban religious swimwear -- including burkinis -- in the wake of recent terror attacks in the country.

The bans were later overturned in court.

Anti-Semitic vandalism in Holland rises 40% to highest level since 2007

JTA (10.03.2018) — <http://bit.ly/2tFggyJ> — The number of incidents involving anti-Semitic vandalism recorded in the Netherlands last year increased by 40 percent, to a 10-year high of 28 cases.

The increase in vandalism was part of a small overall rise in anti-Semitic incidents in 2017 over 2016, the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel, or CIDI, wrote in its annual incidents report, which the group published on 10 March (<http://bit.ly/2FISLtl>). CIDI recorded 113 incidents in 2017 compared to 109 in 2016.

The data was published amid unprecedented developments in public debate on anti-Semitism in the Netherlands. This month, almost all of the political parties contending in the municipal elections in Amsterdam signed a document vowing tougher action against anti-Semitism.

The move followed a Palestinian man's smashing of windows in December of a kosher restaurant in Amsterdam. Holding a Palestinian flag, he then broke in and stole an Israeli one before being arrested.

Last week, the rightist leader of the Party for Freedom, Geert Wilders, visited the restaurant. The Forum for Democracy party produced for the first time in the history of Dutch politics an ad campaign focused exclusively on anti-Semitism ahead of the March 21 municipal elections.

Four incidents recorded by CIDI in 2017 involved physical violence against people.

In one case, two Israelis were stabbed in an elevator on July 18 in a suburb of Amsterdam. A witness later testified that the assault was anti-Semitic. Two 18-year-old men were sentenced to prison for the assault. The victims were not in the Netherlands during the trial and therefore the witness' testimony was not substantiated.

Another incident, dated 26 June, involved a Jew of Syrian descent who was assaulted on Amsterdam's Dam Square for wearing a Star of David pendant. He had been assaulted earlier this year at a fast-food eatery, where several men broke his arm, he said.

In its recommendations, CIDI urged the judiciary to impose heavier sentences on offenders to increase deterrence. It also recommended the Dutch government and judiciary adopt the European Parliament's definition of anti-Semitism. It features examples of demonization of Israel. In recent years, it was adopted by the United Kingdom and Romania, among other countries.

Netherlands joins UN Security Council to shine light on IS genocide

World Watch Monitor (11.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2r10m0c> - The Netherlands has just joined the UN Security Council as a temporary member for a year. Ten days before, its Foreign Minister, Halbe Zijlstra, published a letter explaining the Dutch government's response on the use by politicians of the term "genocide".

The Dutch Parliament had had several debates on the "genocide" committed by members of the Islamic State group (IS), and came to a consensus that it was not for politicians but for the international judicial system to make such a determination.

The Dutch government's response - the main points of which can be viewed at the bottom of the article - followed a joint legal opinion from the Advisory Committee on International Law Issues (CAVV) and the External Adjudication Adviser (EVA), which it had requested at the end of 2016.

"The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year."

The Dutch government supported this legal opinion, and confirmed its reluctance to use the word "genocide" where such a determination had not been previously made by an international court or UN body.

However, concerning the atrocities perpetrated by IS against Christians and Yazidis, the Dutch government confirmed that it "is the opinion that sufficient facts have been established to judge that [IS] is most likely guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity". It added that the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide apply to IS's atrocities.

This declaration is late, in comparison with other actors. The opinion published by the Dutch government, relying on the joint legal opinion of CAVV and EVA, clarifies the approach to be taken by government and parliamentary officials concerning mass atrocities that may amount to genocide.

Additionally, the Dutch government indicated in its letter the possible direction of work, including: referral of the situation in Syria to the ICC; supporting the work of the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, a new mechanism established by the UN General Assembly resolution to collect evidence of atrocities in Syria; and assisting the Investigative Team, a new mechanism established by the UN Security Council to collect evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq.

The Dutch government mentioned that it would further advocate focussing on atrocities perpetrated by other actors in addition to IS. Concerning Iraq, this position has been abandoned by other states for the sake of achieving consensus on the issue of IS.

But the Dutch government emphasised that the atrocities perpetrated by other parties must not be neglected and forgotten.

Analysis by Ewelina Ochab*

The Dutch government must be commended for its work on this topic. Hopefully those promises are translated into action and will be visible over the next year.

It should also be emphasised that apart from the commendable joint opinion of the CAVV and EVA, the Dutch government has had great assistance on the topic from MP Pieter

Omtzigt, who represents the Netherlands at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and became a rapporteur on bringing IS to justice in late 2016.

His mandate included preparing a report outlining the options to bring IS to justice, and a resolution proposing recommendations to member states to the Council of Europe. The report and the resolution were adopted by the EU in late 2017.

Omtzigt will continue to hold his mandate for another year to follow up on the recommendations made in the EU resolution, as he looks to ensure the Dutch government makes a firm stance at the UN Security Council.

He has said he wants to ensure IS militants are prosecuted for their involvement and complicity through an international or hybrid tribunal (a domestic court with significant support of international expert and judges).

The UK recently claimed that it was not "crucial" to make such a determination of genocide, and that it has fulfilled its international obligations by working with the Iraqi government on UN Security Council Resolution 2379, establishing the Investigative Team to collect the evidence of IS atrocities in Iraq, and has been providing humanitarian assistance. However, there is more to the story.

Indeed, the determination of genocide should not be crucial to trigger the obligations under the 1948 UN Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide; historically, however, this has been done first after the use of the word "genocide".

The UK was the leading force behind the UN Security Council Resolution 2379 that passed successfully on 21 September 2017. However, the resolution proposes that Iraqi courts will deal with prosecutions of the perpetrators. The question is whether Iraqi courts can do so.

British peer David Alton questioned the UK government on what checks it had done before proposing, by way of Resolution 2379, Iraqi courts prosecute IS militants. The UK government responded that it was currently considering the issue, namely after the resolution was adopted and not in preparation of the resolution, to allow it to propose the best solution for bringing IS to justice.

If, in fact, Iraqi courts do not have the capacity, it means that an international or a hybrid tribunal will need to be established, as proposed by Omtzigt. Furthermore, the UK has failed to prosecute returning IS fighters. According to the information submitted by the UK to the Council of Europe, as of early 2017 only 101 individuals connected with IS atrocities have been convicted, which may be just the tip of the iceberg, considering that 425 are said to have returned to the UK.

The UK has been actively supporting the work of the Global Coalition against IS, a coalition of 74 countries with the aim to tackle IS on all fronts. However, at the same time, the assistance provided to the victims of the IS genocide is concerning. The UK government confirmed that it is funding 171 projects in the Christian areas affected by IS atrocities and 80 projects in the Yazidi areas. While this may sound reassuring, the extent, impact, and benefit of these projects is unclear. I attempted to obtain this information by way of Freedom of Information request but have not received word back yet.

However, as indicated in the letter from the Dutch government, the determination of genocide is a vital step towards the fulfilment of the obligations to prevent and punish.

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