

***The Hague/ Amsterdam/ Rotterdam Times* interview with Ehsan Jami, founder of Committee of Ex-Muslims**

‘Islam is not a religion, it is a sect’

AMSTERDAM | The controversial PvdA politician and founder of the Committee for Ex-Muslims Ehsan Jami (22) dominated the headlines this summer. Jami, who has called prophet Mohammed a “criminal” and Islam a “sect”, went into hiding after he was allegedly assaulted by three men of immigrant descent on 4 August. He currently receives the highest possible level of protection from the government. That means that it is virtually impossible for the media to contact him.

The Times spoke to him a week before the dramatic series of events unfolded – a remarkable coincidence. Ehsan Jami on Islam, emancipation, “Allah’s PvdA” and the effects of his controversial initiative on his personal life.

By Lula Ahrens

The Central Committee for Ex-Muslims supports lapsed Muslims, but you also target the Islam itself.

“The aim of the committee is to support lapsed Muslims. Apart from that, my personal aim is to break taboos within Islamic belief. I want to raise the women’s rights issue and promote the acceptance of Islamic gays. In short, I want to dedicate myself to the integration and the emancipation process of Muslims. Those are the issues I really want to fight for. Muslims are not pitiful; their own responsibility must be pointed out to them. That is not a rightist theme, it is a neutral theme. This is about our constitution. The PvdA has very weak knees when it comes to this issue, and delivers a completely wrong message.”

Nevertheless, you stand up for the PvdA leadership. Why PvdA?

“I am a social liberal, and want to help the less fortunate. I am liberal regarding integration and emancipation issues. The PvdA has no straightforward story. They are constantly abreast of things. I want to formulate a clear stance and defend that. Do I want to reform the party in that sense? Yes, I do.”

How sore is the subject of apostasy within the Dutch Muslim community?

“Very sore. That is obvious from the reactions I get; mosque leaders proclaim that I am an incestuous monster and a dickhead. Also, I have received over three hundred e-mails from ex-Muslims. This is a gigantic problem. Muslims who renounce their religion lose their family and friends. Islam is not a religion, it is a sect. It doesn’t even let go off its followers.

I have read the most heart-breaking stories imaginable, for instance from an Iraqi guy who told me: ‘Ever since I left Islam, I have a major conflict with my parents, whom I haven’t seen for two years. I have lost all of my friends and family’. I know many people who have moved abroad because they couldn’t cope with life in The Netherlands, because their communities’ views are so

strict. A girl wrote to me that she cries day and night because her parents don't allow her to fall away from her belief and force her to wear a headscarf. That hurts. I have to admit that I am touched by stories like these."

What is the aim of the Central Committee of ex-Muslims?

"We want to be an emancipation movement, like the gay movement thirty years ago. Therefore, we have no members and do not want to receive any subsidies, however keen people are to grant them. Thirty years ago, a few homosexuals stood up and said: 'I am gay'. Then the rest followed, and now it is natural to be open about one's sexual nature. That is what we must head for.

I hope we will manage to create a climate in which lapsed Muslims needn't be afraid, where freedom of speech is put before everything else. We are already heading in the right direction. By now, the committee of ex-Muslims has become a European movement. Besides Germany, committees have been initiated in England, France, Austria and Sweden. Important figures like Michiel Hegener, Paul Cliteur and Afshin Ellian support the Dutch initiative."

Have you yourself fallen away from Islam? There seems to be a fair amount of confusion regarding this question. You said in an interview with the PvdA magazine The Red Heron three years ago that you have been raised 'unreligiously' and liberally, because your father does not adhere to a religion and your mother was relatively recently converted to Christianity. In recent interviews however you state that you have been brought up according to Islam and that your father is a Muslim.

"I have an Islamic background, but fortunately I have had a liberal upbringing. My mother was converted to Christianity a few years ago. My father is still a Muslim, but not a practising one. The rest of my family – grandfather, grandmother, nephews, nieces – are. After 11 September 2001 I studied the Koran, and reached the conclusion that I cannot identify with Islam. I then renounced my religion. And by the way, who cares whether I have been raised according to the Islam or not?"

Some people do think that makes a difference, which is understandable.

"I stand up for homosexuals and women as well. Am I a homosexual or a woman? No. If you want to find a stick with which to bash me, you will. I just want to strive for what's good for The Netherlands. Women and homosexual men who never see daylight, are not."

Former VVD MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who now works for a conservative think tank in Washington, is by far Hollands' best known and most controversial Islam critic of immigrant descent. She is also an ex-Muslim. Do you use her as a model?

"I have a tremendous amount of respect for Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her fight for women's rights, but my approach is very different. Other than her, I do want to start a dialogue with the Muslim community and visit mosques and Islamic schools. They should be preaching that Muslims are allowed to fall away from their belief, that girls can choose not to wear a head scarf. "

What concrete steps will the committee take to get ex-Muslims to join in?

“We will get the debate going, start a dialogue with mosque leaders, among others, and seek publicity. We want to create an advertising spot. VVD-MP Joustra has proposed to buy broadcasting time from Al Yazheera. If we do this, we must do it thoroughly! I want to build a country that we are proud of, with civil norms and without fear.”

Will the integration and emancipation of Muslims be your main point of interest as member of the PvdA Board?

“No, of course not. I want the PvdA to be a party that all Dutch citizens are proud of. Not the party of Allah, just the PvdA (Labour Party).

Does that mean that according to you, the PvdA is currently a ‘party of Allah’?

“A little, yes. The PvdA has not formulated a clear stance with regard to the Armenian genocide, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and myself.”

What is your personal situation like at the moment; are you still studying science of public administration?

“No, I quit. The pressure became too much. I feel that it is unsafe to go to school. One third of the students there is of immigrant descent; I have been abused and intimidated several times already.”

Ehsan Jami

Thirteen years ago, PvdA Leidschendam–Voorburg council member Ehsan Jami (22) fled from Iran to The Netherlands together with his parents and sister, where they received the Dutch nationality. His father, a politically active pharmacist, was anti-Khomeini. His mother is a Christian.

Jami lived in The Hague until he went into hiding recently and was a student of science of public administration at a college of higher education in his home city. He quit his study several months ago because he felt threatened by some of his fellow students..

Jami told The Times that he himself went into the Koran after the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, which led him to the conclusion that “he could not identify himself with the Islamic religion”. Five years later he decided to found the Committee for Ex-Muslims, which is meant to offer support to those who no longer believe in Islam.

Jami has developed a strong bond with his “new mother country”. The young PvdA-politician is working on a film on apostasy and homosexuality. His book on Islam in The Netherlands and his views on the PvdA will be published in September.

Update: the Ehsan Jami controversy

The Central Committee of Ex-Muslims is designed to support lapsed Muslims. It aims to defend the constitutional right to freedom of religion of former Muslims and make Muslim taboos regarding domestic violence and the violation of

women's rights discussible. It also calls on the Dutch government to offer more support to threatened ex-Muslims. Its methods however are questioned by a fair amount of Dutch politicians. Even PvdA leader Wouter Bos has stated that his party will not back the committee, although according to Bos the PvdA is "the only party that unambiguously defends the right to fall away from one's belief, Islam included".

The founders of the Committee of Ex-Muslims are PvdA city council member Ehsan Jami and Loubna Berrada, also founder of the Advisory Commission Integration of the VVD. The foundation followed a similar German initiative in Februari 2007, called 'Zentralrat der Ex-Muslime'. Berrada stepped out of the Committee at the beginning of June 2007 out of unease with Jami's far-reaching criticism of the Islam.

In an interview with *Trouw* in June, Jami called the prophet Mohammed a "criminal" and a "terrible man" who could be "compared to Osama Bin Laden or Saddam Hussein". Jami had stated before that the Koran contains stipulations that are "backward".

On the other hand, the committee is supported by a number of well-known advisors, among whom the Iranian professor and philosopher of law Afshin Ellian, a fierce critic of the Islam.

It will be officially founded in mid September, if recent events leave the schedule intact. On Saturday 4 August, Jami was assaulted near a supermarket. What happened exactly remains a mystery. Geert Wilders seized the opportunity to breathe new life into his anti-Islam crusade immediately. The day after the incident he published a letter in *de Volkskrant* demanding a total ban of the Koran, the "fascist book" that dictates that apostasy reserves a death sentence and leads the Netherlands to "hell and damnation". "Last Saturday, that almost became reality: the unbelieving Jami was beaten black and blue by two Moroccans and a Somali", he wrote.

Jami told various media different versions of the incident, which caused a number of them, among which *De Groene Amsterdammer*, to question his reliability. He told *NRC Handelsblad* that three men of immigrant descent kicked him to the ground, after which he "saw blood everywhere and got a black out". The journalist whom he told his story saw him the following Tuesday and remarked that he "did not even have a scratch".

A 17-year-old Leidschendam resident confessed having punched and kicked Jami once last week Friday, but he claims that he was on his own .