



## Crossing Oceans: 'Beyond Us and Them'

November 3rd and 4th, 2019, Rotterdam

### Information for the speakers

Mr. Christian Picciolini

Mr. Mohamed Elibiary

Mr. John Harris Loflin

### Introduction about the project

In today's world, we live in a polarised climate and the Netherlands are no exception to this. There is a strong tendency to view the world in terms of 'us' and 'them', based on distinctions of ethnicity and/or religion. A lot of people especially perceive a distinction or even an intrinsic contradiction between 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims'. Although this distinction does no justice at all to the real diversity in the population, it dominates the public and political debate and lives in the hearts and minds of many Dutch people. SPIOR is concerned about this, because it is not a healthy situation for a sustainable open, democratic and diverse society. These feelings and perceptions, if not addressed effectively, can also be a breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism.

SPIOR has been working against extremism (in any form) for some years now. Our focus is on prevention, by building resilience amongst Muslim communities. We work with authority figures (imams, teachers, active volunteers, youth workers) in the diverse Muslim communities in Rotterdam and across the Netherlands to strengthen communities. These authority figures are trained and then organise meetings with youngsters and/or parents about the threats of extremism. In our experience, these meetings are not just about understanding the dangers of extremism and denouncing violence, but for the larger part, the discussions are about people's sense of belonging in this country, about feeling excluded, about the sense of injustice in their own lives and in the world, about the double standard they feel is applied, about discrimination, etcetera. Thinking in terms of 'us against them' and also some steps towards dehumanisation of 'the other', is clearly present as well. Again, these factors can be a breeding ground, or put differently: a cognitive opening, for influences of extremism, if not addressed effectively. Addressing it starts with talking about it, letting people share their concerns and offering an alternative vision and narrative.

The Netherlands are not alone in facing these challenges. Many countries in Europe and in the world are struggling with how to effectively oppose (violent) extremism. The United States are in the forefront of the fight against extremism, with initiatives like 'Strong cities', in which cities across the globe exchange knowledge and work together in building social cohesion and community resilience against violent extremism in all its forms. We can learn from each other and share knowledge and experience to work on this common goal. With this plan, we propose a concrete exchange between the United States and the Netherlands on these issues.



## Concrete activities

- **November 3rd, 2019, 12pm – 3pm**

A mini-conference for key figures like board members and other representatives of Islamic organisations, which will also be accessible to interested people from other areas;

- **November 3rd, 2019, 4pm – 7pm**

A workshop for youngsters in Muslim communities in Rotterdam-Rijnmond;

- **November 4th, 2019, 12pm – 2.30pm**

A meeting with policy makers from local and national government, police and other institutions who are actively involved in countering violent extremism (and related areas), so that they can also use the insights of the speakers in their work;

*Catering is provided at each activity.*

## Venue

All three activities will take place at the (multicultural) mosque ‘**Centrum de Middenweg**’ (translated: Centre of the Middle way), which is a grassroots member organisation of SPIOR.

Address: **Kerdijkstraat 16, 3038 XE, Rotterdam** (15 mins walk from the Central Station)



## Contact details:

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## Description of the activities

**Firstly, a mini-conference for a broad audience** with the guest speakers from the United States. The aim is to let this take place at one of SPIOR’s member grassroots organisations, like a mosque. Through this meeting, other key figures like **board members of Islamic organisations** will have the



opportunity to learn from the guest speakers from the United States and to exchange their experiences, ideas and opinions about preventing radicalisation and countering violent extremism. The mini-conference will also be accessible for interested people from other organisations.

**In the second activity**, the speakers from the United States will be asked to provide an interactive **workshop for a group of youngsters** who are active within the local Muslim communities.

The primary target group of the workshop and the follow-up meetings is Muslim youth in the Netherlands, and more specifically in Rotterdam. The Muslim communities in the Netherlands are very diverse in cultural backgrounds, religious experience and practice, migration backgrounds etcetera. SPIOR is unique because it brings together all this diversity. Among them are Muslim youngsters whose grandparents came from Turkey or Morocco as so-called 'guest workers', but also converts and refugee groups from for example Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan and Bosnia. Also, it is important to mention that, although the primary target group is Muslim youth, SPIOR does not exclude anyone from its activities. So the workshop would be open to everyone who is interested in the topic, regardless of ethnicity, religion or any other aspect.

The size of the workshop will be kept small because its outline is an interactive training for the participants, who will subsequently use the acquired skills to organise their own meetings in their community. We will invite youngsters who are key figures in their community. The workshop is aimed at giving in-depth insight into the expertise of the speakers. For example: how can we apply pedagogies of recognition and democratic education in our communities? It is important that the workshops are held interactively, so that on the one hand participants can learn from the in-depth knowledge and experience of the speakers, and on the other hand they can explain the problems they face in their community concerning the (prevention of) radicalisation. Those problems will be dealt in interactive discussions between the attendants and the speakers. The participants will apply the acquired knowledge and skills in their community work. In this way, a sustainable impact for preventing radicalisation and countering violent extremism can be reached in the most effective manner.

We see the youngsters as ambassadors of this project, who will disseminate the workshop's results in their own community. We ask them to *organise a subsequent meeting for young members in their local community*. Specifically, it means that each of the 20 youngsters who have attended the workshop will hold a meeting (a couple weeks after the workshop) for other youngsters and discuss upon the topics and outcomes of the workshops.

**The third activity** is a **meeting with policy makers** from local and national government, police and other institutions, working on countering violent extremism (and related areas), so that they can also use the insights of the speakers in their work. In this meeting, they can exchange good practices and approaches in preventing and countering violent extremism. They will discuss upon current and new methods or approaches for countering extremism.





## About SPIOR

SPIOR (Foundation Platform for Islamic Organisations in the Rotterdam-Rijnmond area) is the umbrella organisation for 72 mosques and Islamic socio-cultural grassroots organisations, from 13 different cultural communities in the Rotterdam-Rijnmond area. SPIOR has an intermediary function between the member organisations on the one hand and government institutions (local, national and European), other societal organisations and the media on the other hand. Connected to that, SPIOR also develops and implements projects. SPIOR is active on a range of issues affecting Muslims in the Netherlands, but also for the wider society, such as education, women's emancipation, anti-discrimination, social cohesion, organ donation, poverty, etcetera. SPIOR aims to contribute to tackling current issues and bringing people together in order to do so, and excludes no-one from its activities. SPIOR is unique in the Netherlands in its organisation, expertise and activities and because of that, is not just regionally active, but also at the national and sometimes even international level. As mentioned in the introduction, building resilience within Muslim communities against extremism is also prominently on SPIOR's agenda.

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