

# THE NETHERLANDS: RED CARD TO ANTISEMITES

On May 6, 2023, the Amsterdam police arrested 154 supporters of the Dutch professional soccer club AZ Alkmaar after the fans were suspected of scanting antisemitic texts in the metro on the way to an Ajax vs. AZ Alkmaar match. The AZ supporters were arrested on the charge of group defamation, denoting the act of making false and damaging statements about a group of people.

The arrests sent an important signal and set a precedent regarding the number of people arrested.

In 2019, research by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service showed that antisemitic incidents accounted for 41% of all discrimination cases in the Netherlands. Of these, the majority (32%) were soccer-related.<sup>1</sup>

Antisemitism has been a part of professional Dutch soccer for decades. It generally appears around matches of the Amsterdam club Ajax, because of the club's Jewish image. This image developed because Ajax used to have a relatively large Jewish fan base before the Second World War. Ten percent of the city of Amsterdam's population was Jewish before the war, and the first Ajax stadium, De Meer, was based in a neighborhood located in eastern Amsterdam where most of the residents were Jewish. However, only four Jewish players and two Jewish directors have represented the club. In that sense, its Jewish image is largely based on myths.<sup>2</sup>

It was actually the Ajax fans who adopted a Jewish image and started using the term "Jews" in self-reference during the 1970s. Since then, Ajax supporters have used the Israeli flag, yarmulkes, and stars of David as their badge of honor. Ajax fans chant "Jews" and "super-Jews" in support of their club.

This phenomenon triggered chants, banners and gestures from competing clubs that were antisemitic. The lyrics of these chants and songs include references to the Holocaust, the SS, the gas chambers and "Jew-hunting." Other songs make reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and rival fan clubs have used the Palestinian flag.

On May 6, 2023, the chants for which the AZ-supporters were arrested included "Cancer Jews, olé olé," " Hamas Hamas, all Jews to the gas" and "Whoever doesn't jump is a Jew and all Jews must die."<sup>3</sup> That these songs sounded in the Amsterdam metro just two days after Dutch

<sup>1</sup> "Criminal Discrimination in Focus: 2017 [Dutch]," Publication by the Netherlands' House of Representatives, January 25, 2019, pp. 20, 25, [https://www.om.nl/binaries/om/documenten/publicaties/discriminatie/lecd/cijfers-in-beeld/cijfers-in-beeld/om\\_strafbare\\_discriminatie\\_in\\_beeld\\_2017+%281%29.pdf](https://www.om.nl/binaries/om/documenten/publicaties/discriminatie/lecd/cijfers-in-beeld/cijfers-in-beeld/om_strafbare_discriminatie_in_beeld_2017+%281%29.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Michiel de Hoog, "Feyenoord-Ajax Knows One Loser Today: History [Dutch]," *De Correspondent*, October 28, 2015, <https://decorrespondent.nl/3539/een-verliezer-kent-feyenoord-ajax-vandaag-sowieso-de-geschiedenis/397cbf47-cdee-0296-3e27-0ea288ea1921>.

<sup>3</sup> "Public Prosecutor: 'They Sang about Jews and Nouri,' yet AZ-Supporters won't be Prosecuted [Dutch]," *NH-Nieuws*, September 5, 2023, <https://www.nhnieuws.nl/nieuws/324242/om-er-is-gezongen-over-joden-en-nouri-toch-worden-az-supporters-niet-vervolgd>.

Memorial Day (May 4, the national day of commemoration for the Dutch victims of the Second World War) made the incident all the more shameful and horrific.<sup>4</sup>

Fans of rival teams claim that their texts are directed against Ajax (whose supporters call themselves Jews) and not against Jews. However, even though the texts do not target Jews directly, they are antisemitic in nature and have triggered antisemitism in the social sphere beyond the soccer stadiums.

Rival fan clubs' usage of the word 'Jew' has increased the word's negative and offensive connotations.<sup>5</sup> The Dutch Jewish advocacy organization Center for Information and Documentation Israel (CIDI) reported that in 2022, antisemitic songs and chants known from the soccer scene were heard outside the walls of the stadium, including in classrooms, entertainment venues, and restaurants.<sup>6</sup>

The bodies responsible for responding to antisemitic incidents in Dutch soccer include the soccer clubs, the Dutch National Soccer Association (KNVB), as well as municipalities and law enforcement agencies. These bodies, at times, have to be pushed to action by Jewish or anti-discrimination advocacy organizations. Soccer clubs have various tools at their disposal in the event of antisemitic manifestations, including direct warnings to the public and suspension from matches in the event of continuous chants.

Rival soccer clubs that do not take effective action against their supporters could also be placed under certain sanctions, for example, not allowing their supporters to attend the next match. In other instances, monetary fines were imposed by the KNVB on soccer clubs for not doing enough to stop antisemitic expressions during matches at their stadium or by their fan clubs.

On May 6, 2023, one of the reasons that the police were able to intervene was that their forces were present in the metro in large enough numbers. This is not always the case. In addition, logistically, it is easier to arrest people when they are in a subway rather than in a stadium.<sup>7</sup> The Amsterdam police noted that "the purpose of the arrests was to put an immediate end to further insults and disruption of the public order."<sup>8</sup>

Criminal prosecution of the perpetrators has proved challenging because criminal charges can only be filed against individuals for their actions. In the case of the 154 AZ supporters who

<sup>4</sup> May 4 officially commemorates all civilians and members of the armed forces of the Kingdom of the Netherlands who have died in wars or peacekeeping missions since the beginning of the Second World War. Three quarters of Dutch Jews were murdered during the Second World War; a number that is proportionally much higher than that of other Western European countries such as Belgium and France.

<sup>5</sup> Joram Verhoeven, "Football-related Antisemitism Compared," Anne Frank House, June 2015, [https://www.annefrank.org/en/downloads/filer\\_public/db/2d/db2d8481-5a32-4d4b-b695-498849e71d1e/football-related-anti-semitism-compared\\_2016.pdf](https://www.annefrank.org/en/downloads/filer_public/db/2d/db2d8481-5a32-4d4b-b695-498849e71d1e/football-related-anti-semitism-compared_2016.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> "Monitor of Antisemitic incidents in the Netherlands, 2022 [Dutch]," CIDI (Center for Information and Documentation Israel), June 26, 2023, <https://www.cidi.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CIDI-Monitor-antisemitische-incidenten-2022-26-06-2023.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> "National Coordinator for Combating Antisemitism Calls Mass Arrest of AZ Fans 'Important Signal' [Dutch]," NOS News, May 7, 2023, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2474190-antisemitismebestrijder-noemt-massa-aanhouding-az-fans-belangrijk-signaal>.

<sup>8</sup> Interview by the author with The Amsterdam Police Department's public relations officer, November 9, 2023.

were arrested in May 2023, the police were unable to gather conclusive evidence to establish a clear link between the individual members of the arrested group and the antisemitic chants heard from the group. This led the Public Prosecution Service to decide not to prosecute.<sup>9</sup>

A representative of the Public Prosecution Service explained to the author that the type of conclusive evidence it needs in order to prosecute would be camera footage, preferably including sound, which proves each individual's exact contribution to the criminal act.<sup>10</sup> The spokesperson further added that it is the task of the police to gather such conclusive evidence and that soccer fans have been sentenced to community service for similar charges in the past.<sup>11</sup> The cases that led to criminal prosecution almost always combined antisemitic expressions and vandalism. On May 6, 2023, of the 154 supporters arrested, the large majority were released after a few hours, while only eleven of them spent the night in prison because of additional charges of vandalism and violence against police officers.

Although the possibility of imposing consequences for antisemitic expressions by large groups of soccer fans appears rather limited, the May 6, 2023, arrests highlight the option of exercising a zero-tolerance approach through law enforcement intervention. It shows individuals and groups who think antisemitic chants are legitimate that they, in fact, engage in criminal activity. This sends a strong signal to sports fans and to society at large.

The police intervention in the Amsterdam metro was applauded by the Dutch National Soccer Association, the Mayor of Amsterdam, Jewish organizations, and NGOs combatting antisemitism and discrimination. The soccer club AZ Alkmaar, as well as national newspaper editorials, all condemned the actions of the AZ fans. A spokesperson for CIDI was pleased with the police intervention because it “finally set an example of a good tit-for-tat policy.”

## Policy Recommendations

1. **Fight Harder.** The Dutch National Soccer Association (KNVB), Dutch soccer clubs, police and municipalities should resolve to respond to soccer-related antisemitism more swiftly and overwhelmingly, as was done on May 6, 2023. All too often, perpetrators remain anonymous, and the consequences of their behavior are inadequate for deterring antisemitic behavior.
2. **Punish Individuals.** To effectively fight antisemitism, it is crucial that individual fans, rather than groups at large or the teams they root for, are punished. To that end, more funds should be invested in innovative technology that facilitates the identification of perpetrators. The technology for smart cameras with sound recognition, including means to guarantee privacy,

<sup>9</sup> “Group defamation immediately stopped by police intervention before the Ajax-AZ match [Dutch],” Public Prosecution Service, September 5, 2023, <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuws/2023/09/04/door-ingrijpen-politie-groepsbelediging-voor-wedstrijd-ajax-az-direct-gestopt>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview by the author with The Netherlands Public Prosecution Service's public relations officer for the Amsterdam region, November 7, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Judgment of the District Court of Rotterdam of September 25, 2017, case no. ECLI:NL:RBROT:2017:7296 [Dutch], <https://uitspraken.rechtspraak.nl/#!/details?id=ECLI:NL:RBROT:2017:7296>, and “Community Service for Antisemitic Slogans [Dutch],” *Opportuun* no. 5, November 2021, <https://magazines.openbaarministerie.nl/opportuun/2021/05/taakstraf-voor-antisemitische-leuzen>.

already exists and has proven effective.<sup>12</sup> In the event of police arrest, audiovisual materials can prove the individual’s criminal act and enable criminal prosecution of perpetrators. In other cases, this technology could serve to track down perpetrators and impose a stadium ban together with additional sanctions.

3. **Encourage Commitment.** Efforts from the soccer clubs’ leadership to take concrete steps to eliminate antisemitic expressions among their supporters and in their stadiums should be encouraged. It will also be useful to develop responsibility among soccer clubs, soccer players and fan clubs to spread information about antisemitism and what it causes.

– *Dr. Joyce Van de Bildt*

<sup>12</sup> “Monitor of Antisemitic Incidents in the Netherlands, 2022 [Dutch],” CIDI (Center for Information and Documentation Israel), June 26, 2023, <https://www.cidi.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CIDI-Monitor-antisemitische-incidenten-2022-26-06-2023.pdf>.