



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Security and Justice

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 45

June 2017

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Current threat level: Substantial



Introduction: The threat level for the Netherlands remains at 'substantial', level 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. This means that the chance of an attack is real but that there are no specific indications that an attack is being prepared. Since the previous DTN there have been no developments that would make an attack in the Netherlands less conceivable. The main threat to the Netherlands is posed by jihadism, in the form of a variety of actors (terrorist organisations, transnational networks, small cells and lone terrorists) potentially able to carry out both small- and large-scale attacks.



1. General threat level

The attacks committed in the West by ISIS and its sympathisers since the second half of 2014 illustrate the jihadist threat. Along with ISIS, al Qa'ida also poses an increasing threat to the West. This group has the capacity and expertise to carry out complex attacks in Europe. Beyond the jihadist threat, in various Western countries there is also a risk of violence on the part of far-right terrorists. The attack of 19 June 2017 targeting worshippers at a London mosque is probably an example of such violence. There are no indications of right-wing terrorism in the Netherlands. However, it is possible that such an attack could also take place here.

Terrorist attacks in the West continue to occur. Since the start of this year, dozens of people have died as a result of such attacks. In most cases, the attacks were carried out by a lone terrorist, often apparently inspired by ISIS. In some cases, however, it only later became clear that an ISIS-inspired attacker was in fact 'coached' by ISIS-linked terrorists living abroad, often in Syria. In addition to ISIS-inspired or coached attacks, there is also a threat of coordinated attacks organised and carried out by ISIS's external attack units. It is possible that this unit still has dozens of operatives at its disposal in Europe. As in previous years, attackers in 2017 are using relatively simple and widely available resources, such as knives and vehicles, as

their weapon of choice. This makes preventing such attacks difficult. At the same time, these attacks can potentially affect anyone and inflict mass casualties. Although there are currently no concrete indications that any attacks are being prepared, this sort of attack could occur in the Netherlands.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

The Netherlands' international profile

For some time the Netherlands has been regarded by jihadists as a place where anti-Islamic sentiments are given free rein. As a rule, all countries involved in the anti-ISIS coalition are considered legitimate targets by jihadists. The Netherlands is mentioned from time to time in propaganda by jihadist groups. This was recently the case with two groups in Africa, for instance. One of these groups implicitly named Dutch units in Mali as targets, while the other specifically mentioned the Netherlands as one of Islam's enemies. Furthermore, an Al Qa'ida video included images of Mohammed B. and the lifeless body of Theo van Gogh. In the same video, Hamza bin Laden calls on individuals to carry out attacks in the West. The images referred to were shown in order to reinforce this call to arms.

Jihadist activities in the Netherlands and Dutch jihadist travellers

Jihadist activities have taken place in the Netherlands since the 1990s. In addition, for several years now cross-border investigations into jihadists have uncovered links with the Netherlands. For instance, two members of the ISIS network that carried out the attacks in Paris and Brussels were in the Netherlands on 13 November 2015. This was the same day that the Paris attacks occurred. It is not known whether these individuals were preparing to carry out an attack.

The Dutch jihadist movement comprises at least a few hundred individuals. Since the second half of 2015, Dutch jihadist networks have kept a low profile on the public parts of the internet. In recent months jihadists in the Netherlands have, relatively speaking, been more openly active on public social media platforms than in periods covered by previous DTNs. This increase in open activity is particularly evident in relation to certain topics, such as imprisoned jihadists. However, jihadists in the Netherlands continue to be restrained in their public response to attacks. This is probably due to their heightened security awareness. In addition to public social media platforms, Dutch jihadists are also active in closed, secret online groups, where the tone is more strident. The groups use applications that are difficult, if not impossible, to monitor.

Since the second half of 2015, Dutch jihadist networks have been keeping a low profile offline too. By and large, the Dutch jihadist movement is relatively informal and non-hierarchical. Often, it is made up of groups of friends or relatives. A lot of interaction takes place on the internet, and social media in particular. It seems that all jihadists in the Netherlands are in contact in one way or another, directly or indirectly, in real life or via the internet.

There is a somewhat mixed picture with regard to jihadists' willingness to resort to violence. On the one hand, arrests and investigations show that jihadists in the

Netherlands are prepared to use violence. A number of jihadists in the Netherlands, some of whom are returnees, are known to be dangerous. Measures have been taken against these individuals. On the other hand, it is striking that, despite the prevailing opinion that attacks are legitimate and even necessary, the majority of Dutch jihadists have, to date, taken no steps to commit acts of violence themselves. The return of experienced, battle-hardened jihadists from Syria may change this dynamic however. In the short term, it is very unlikely that the vast majority of known Dutch followers of the Saudi scholar Ahmed ibn Umar al-Hazimi – who are quicker than other jihadists to condemn other Muslims as heretical – represent a terrorist threat. Al-Hazimi is estimated to have a few dozen followers in the Netherlands.

Since the start of 2016 there has been a visible decrease in the number of Dutch jihadists travelling to Syria and Iraq. At the time of writing, no new cases have been recorded. As of 1 June 2017 a total of around 280 people had left the Netherlands for jihadist purposes. The number of individuals from the Netherlands who are currently in Syria and Iraq for jihadist purposes is around 190. In addition, there are still very likely to be a considerable number of Dutch jihadists who are keen to join ISIS or another group in the Middle East. A total of 45 jihadist travellers from the Netherlands have died. Since early 2017 there have been growing indications pointing to the death of Dutch jihadists in ISIS-controlled territory. The deceased are primarily men. In reality, it is exceedingly difficult to confirm the deaths of jihadist travellers. A total of around 50 jihadists have returned to the Netherlands to date. The number of jihadists who have succeeded in leaving Syria and making their way back to the Netherlands is still negligible.

Networks of jihadist travellers in the Netherlands are continuing to provide money to jihadist travellers in Iraq and Syria. In a number of cases, the amount per transaction has increased significantly.

3. Terrorist threat to Europe

Jihadist attacks continue

Between 1 January and mid-June, 10 attacks known or strongly suspected to be jihadist in nature were carried out in Western countries. More than 45 people were killed, excluding the perpetrators. In the whole of 2016, 22 jihadist attacks were carried out in the West. Of the 10 attacks so far in 2017, four have taken place in France. Indeed, this is where the majority of attacks since 2014 have occurred. This trend continued in the period under review. It is worth noting, however, that three attacks have taken place within the space of three months in the United Kingdom – a country that had seen few jihadist attacks in recent years.

The targets and *modi operandi* of the 2017 attacks largely corresponded with those of other jihadist attacks seen in recent years. The suicide attack on an arena in Manchester, a type of attack which has been relatively rare in recent years in the West, demonstrates how vulnerable such venues are. Three times now, a vehicle has been used in an attempt to kill as many people as possible. This type of attack was observed twice in 2016. The June 2017 hostage incident in Melbourne is also noteworthy. This *modus operandi* was encouraged in ISIS propaganda that appeared a month before the attack. As in previous years, those who have perpetrated jihadist attacks in 2017 come from a variety of backgrounds. Particularly striking is the relatively advanced age of the perpetrators of five attacks carried out in 2017.

Threat posed by ISIS and ISIS sympathisers

The majority of jihadist attacks in Western countries are attributed or linked to ISIS. Broadly speaking, these attacks fall into three categories. The first is attacks organised by ISIS's external attack unit. Despite increased military pressure and the elimination of key leaders, this unit is still capable of carrying out coordinated attacks

in Europe and is actively pursuing this aim. It is possible that this unit still has dozens of operatives at its disposal in Europe. In the long term, increased military pressure on ISIS will make it more difficult for the unit to coordinate complex attacks to be carried out in the West. In addition, it has become harder for the unit's operatives to enter Europe due to ISIS's limited access to the Turkish border and the strict migration policies of several European countries, particularly the Balkan states. The second category consists of attacks carried out by individuals on their own initiative, but inspired by jihadist propaganda. They may be assisted by others, but there are no organisational links with ISIS or ISIS fighters. A significant number of attacks carried out in the West from the second half of 2014 onwards fall into this category. The third category comprises attacks where one or more perpetrators have been coached by terrorists with links to ISIS abroad, often in Syria. Sometimes it only becomes clear later, following an investigation, that an ISIS-inspired attacker was in fact 'coached'. So far, the attacks that have taken place in 2017 appear to have been either inspired or 'coached' by ISIS.

It is striking that, of the more than 1,000 jihadists who have returned to the EU from Iraq and Syria in recent years, only a small number have been involved in attacks on Western countries. And most of them had been sent back by ISIS for the express purpose of carrying out an attack. There is no doubt that returnees are relevant as regards the terrorist threat, but they currently account for a minority of attackers. That may change, however. The increasing military pressure on ISIS could mean that more trained jihadists will return to Western countries. It is possible that these returnees will be more involved in planning attacks in the West than those who came before them. As expected, jihadist travellers are returning gradually, not in large numbers.

As ISIS comes under increasing pressure in Syria and Iraq, there is also a growing

likelihood that women too will be sent to Europe to carry out attacks. In the past year, women have been involved in several attacks and attempted attacks outside Syria and Iraq. Some of them are thought to have close links to members of ISIS, or to have been following their instructions. In addition to the threat posed by female jihadists, in recent months it once again emerged that several minors in Western countries have been inspired by ISIS propaganda or have followed instructions given by ISIS fighters in Syria.

Threat to the West posed by Al Qa'ida

The Al Qa'ida core continues to form a substantial threat to the US and Europe. Given its increased capabilities, primarily in Syria and Afghanistan, the group is considered capable of carrying out attacks in the West.

Resistance to the terrorist threat

The complex jihadist threat represents a significant challenge to Western countries' resistance capabilities. Often, the perpetrators of attacks were known to the authorities but had not been arrested due to insufficient evidence. It is also difficult to predict who among known potentially violent extremists will actually commit acts of violent terrorism. Terrorists can obtain items like weapons and false documents by various means, including through criminal contacts. Limited identity checks within the Schengen area mean terrorists can often travel without attracting attention. The asylum procedure has proved vulnerable to abuses. Authorities in Western countries are attempting to deal with these challenges, not without some success.

As in previous reporting periods, arrests in various European countries have managed to thwart attacks. Sometimes arrests have led to the discovery of arms or explosives. In most cases, those arrested were ISIS sympathisers or individuals who were in contact with the group. Such arrests, carried out across Europe, demonstrate that security agencies are actively working on

the detection, investigation and prosecution of potential terrorists. Their work prevents some attacks from occurring, but preventing all attacks is impossible.

4. International developments

ISIS in Syria and Iraq

ISIS's military situation in Syria and Iraq, the core territory of the group's 'caliphate', has not changed significantly since the previous DTN. In both countries ISIS remains under increasing military pressure from a range of adversaries. Since the summer of 2014, this unrelenting pressure has led to the loss of most of the 'caliphate's' territory in both Iraq and Syria. In addition, many of its leaders and members have been killed; their propaganda machine and sources of income are suffering; and the arrival of fresh foreign recruits has fallen off sharply. Despite these setbacks, in recent months ISIS has again shown itself to be a resilient organisation. The expectation is that, at a certain point, ISIS will have to abandon urban centres in both Iraq and Syria and withdraw to the border area between the two countries, where it will continue to fight, using guerrilla tactics. It is also conceivable that ISIS will attempt to carry out more attacks in Western countries in order to draw attention away from the losses it is suffering in its core territory.

HTS in Syria

Since its establishment in January 2017 the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) has been attempting to monopolise the violent struggle against the Assad regime. In parts of the country where it occupies a strong military position, it has attacked groups that refuse to submit to it. If HTS succeeds in co-opting the uprising – even if only in parts of Syria – this would reinforce the 'jihadisation' of the Syrian conflict. HTS remains an al Qa'ida-allied group that could carry out future attacks in the West if it believes that would be advantageous.

ISIS in Somalia

In Somalia ISIS's efforts are mainly focused on gaining a foothold in Puntland. Online, the leader of ISIS in Puntland has called for attacks to be carried out in Europe and the US. At present, it is doubtful whether ISIS in Puntland is capable of carrying out an attack outside Somalia.

ISIS in Libya

Given the loss of its Sirte stronghold, it is likely that ISIS in Libya will focus less on gaining territory and more on planning attacks in Libya, the wider region and possibly Europe. The last of these could become more of a priority if ISIS continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria. In this way ISIS in Libya could compensate for any future decline in attack planning by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Far-right activism (i.e. lawful forms of protest) and ring-wing extremism (i.e. unlawful forms of protest)

Far-right activists and right-wing extremists in the Netherlands continue to direct their ire at Islam and Muslims, asylum seekers and ideological opponents. The number of protest actions and demonstrations involving far-right groups has been on the decline since mid-2016, however. The rise in support for far-right groups observed around 2015-2016 appears to have fallen off. The most obvious explanation for this is that, since the period in question, there has been a significant reduction in the number of asylum seekers, thus removing one of the main factors that had fuelled the rise in activity. Nevertheless, far-right groups continue to hold demonstrations. Right-wing extremists continue to use intimidating language towards their political opponents. Although the profile of right-wing extremism appears consistent, potential new trends have emerged. For

instance, there are indications that right-wing extremist groups are focusing more on provoking violent confrontation with left-wing extremist groups. Given that left-wing extremists have been taking the same approach for some time, this increases the chance of violent confrontations between the two groups. There are currently no indications of right-wing extremist terrorism in the Netherlands. However, the terrorism conviction of several individuals who threw a firebomb at a mosque in Enschede in February 2016 shows that the Netherlands is not immune to such threats.

Far-left activism (i.e. lawful forms of protest), left-wing extremism, asylum rights extremism, animal rights extremism and environmental extremism (i.e. unlawful forms of protest)

The focus of *far-left activist and left-wing extremist* groups in the Netherlands continues to be on fighting the (perceived) far right and its supporters; (perceived) racism in the Netherlands; perceived repression and violence by the police; and capitalism. The most salient development in recent months has been these groups' persistence in protesting against the perceived far right. These protest actions sometimes involve threatening and intimidating political figures or candidates, or defacing their homes. A number of Amsterdam-based anarchists operate internationally and are presumed to be involved in large-scale vandalism, arson and robberies. Asylum rights extremism has not changed in any significant way since the period covered by the previous DTN. There have been protests meant to intimidate staff at detention and expulsion centres for failed asylum seekers and at authorities implementing what protesters regard as inhumane asylum policy in the Netherlands and Europe. In recent months, *animal rights extremism* has remained a marginal phenomenon. Besides some illegal protest actions for which no responsibility was claimed, the focus was primarily on lawful activism during the period under review. In addition, *environmental extremism* is either currently non-existent or very rare in the

Netherlands; the focus in this area is mainly on lawful activism. However, there are indications of a possible revival of environment extremism.

Salafism

The growing influence of Salafism in the Netherlands remains a cause for concern. Salafists are increasingly attempting to force an anti-democratic, intolerant and divisive message onto other Muslims. They are also attempting to gain a foothold in moderate mosques and mosque management boards, at times by means of intimidation. From a security perspective, the central question is still how Salafist influence manifests itself. Although sociocultural isolationism is far from a welcome development, active anti-democratic tendencies are the main concern in terms of security, since they can fuel political radicalisation and extremism.

Polarisation

Polarisation in the Netherlands, as well as in other European countries, centres on themes such as Islam, terrorism, migration, 'the elite' and the EU. This has not changed in recent months. Ongoing polarisation in

relation to Islam is not without consequences. For years now, mosques have been the target of aggression. Developments abroad also affect relations in the Netherlands, feeding polarisation both between and within segments of society. In recent months, the campaign relating to the constitutional referendum won by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the main cause of such polarisation. Looking at the campaign period as a whole, it can be reasonably concluded that the existing divisions in Turkish society – and equally, in the Turkish diaspora in Europe – have become further entrenched. It is also worrisome that paramilitary gangs are active in Turkey itself. One of these groups is also illegally active outside Turkey and has established a branch in the Netherlands. In the future it is possible that the group could be deployed in the Netherlands – as it has been in Turkey – to illegally target political opponents of President Erdoğan. In addition, continued protests in al-Hoceima, northern Morocco, could lead to unrest in the Dutch-Moroccan community if there is a violent escalation.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands employs a system of threat levels which indicate the probability of a terrorist attack. In order to establish the current threat level, the NCTV publishes a quarterly Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN). The DTN is a general analysis of both the national and international terrorist threat to the Netherlands, based on information by intelligence and security service and police, open source information, information from foreign counterparts and analyses by Dutch embassy personnel.



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