



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Justice and Security

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 50

June 2019

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Radicalisation - Extremism - Terrorism

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Current threat level:
Substantial

The threat level for the Netherlands remains at 4 ('substantial') on a scale of 1 to 5, which means that there is a real chance of an attack in the Netherlands. The attack in Utrecht and the arrest of individuals with jihadist terrorist intentions are tangible manifestations of this threat.



1. General threat level

On 18 March 2019 the Netherlands experienced its first deadly suspected terrorist attack since the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004. On that day, the threat level was briefly raised to 5 (critical) for the province of Utrecht, amid fear of further attacks and a lack of clarity about the nature of the attack and the whereabouts of the suspect. During the period under review a number of people were arrested (mostly individuals and members of small networks) who sought to carry out jihadist attacks and, in some cases, were actually making preparations to do so, both in the Netherlands and in surrounding countries.¹ The attack in Utrecht and the arrest of individuals with jihadist terrorist intentions are tangible manifestations of this real threat.

The jihadist movement

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands is turbulent and internally fragmented. It has not increased significantly in size, though it is larger than it was before the outbreak of the war in Syria. The threat posed by a given individual with jihadist aims does not necessarily correspond directly to that person's place in the jihadist movement or how active the movement is generally. A change of internal

dynamics, such as the rise of a new leader or new sources of inspiration, could give fresh impetus to the movement.

Jihadist travellers

There are also 155 Dutch jihadists and at least 200 children in Syria and Turkey, in camps, with groups allied to al Qa'ida or elsewhere. The majority of ISIS supporters who ended up in prisons or detention camps in the region after the collapse of the 'caliphate' are still committed to the ISIS ideology. This means they still pose a threat. Once they are released (or if they escape or are liberated), there is a chance they will rejoin the organisation or return to their countries of origin. Contact between jihadist travellers and jihadists who remained in the Netherlands serves to further embed jihadist thinking in the West and could lead to the formation of new networks, composed of European jihadists who have fled the former conflict zones. Transnational networks could therefore pose an ongoing threat to both the region and to Europe.

The threat of an attack

Overall the number of attacks in the West, particularly those inspired by ISIS, has fallen sharply since October 2017. The Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, however, showed that Western interests outside Europe also remain a target of jihadist terrorists. Moreover, despite suffering military defeat in

¹ Including Belgium, France and Germany.

Syria, the threat posed by ISIS has not disappeared. The terrorist organisation still aims to carry out attacks in the West, via its own networks and networks of sympathisers, and it remains capable of mobilising the global jihadist movement. At the same time, its ability to coordinate large attacks in the West has been on the decline for some time. Al Qa'ida is also still committed to carrying out attacks, but for the time being, it does not appear to be in a position to do so. However, the international jihadist threat is posed not only by 'traditional' networks like ISIS or al Qa'ida, but also by individuals or loose-knit, homegrown jihadist networks with international connections, possibly inspired by ISIS or al Qa'ida. As a result, the threat is diffuse.

Right-wing extremism

Given its nature, gravity and scale, the right-wing terrorist attack on two mosques in New Zealand captured the world's attention and elicited widespread horror and condemnation. The attack will continue to be a source of inspiration for various groups in the right-wing extremist scene. It also magnifies the danger of copycat attacks in Europe. In comparison to neighbouring countries, the threat of violence on the part of right-wing extremists is less acute in the Netherlands. Unstable potential lone actors are more likely to act out during periods of social turmoil and publicly visible violence. In Germany a 45-year-old man is suspected of a political murder with right-wing extremist motives in the assassination of Christian Democrat politician Walter Lübcke. Terrorist incidents can also function as a trigger for violent retaliation by jihadists or right-wing extremists.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

The period under review is notable for a series of violent incidents and the reactions they elicited. The first of these was the right-wing terrorist attack in Christchurch – by a lone individual targeting Muslims – which had a profound impact on Dutch Muslims' sense of security. Three days after the Christchurch massacre a Dutch national of Turkish origin – also acting alone – carried out what is presumed to be a terrorist attack against members of the public in the Netherlands.² Both attacks received extensive media coverage.

The attack in Utrecht

On 18 March 2019, 37-year-old Gökmen T. killed four people and seriously injured two others in a tram in Utrecht. Thus far, it is believed that the suspect acted alone. A terrorist motive is suspected, given the violence used and the choice of target and victims – random members of the public. This presumption is reinforced by media reports that the suspect had left a note in his car which used religious language and by eyewitness statements that he shouted 'Allahu Akbar' at the scene. Gökmen T. was known to the authorities as a (sometimes violent) repeat offender and possibly a psychologically unstable or disturbed individual, but not as an extremist. Two weeks before the attack he was on trial for a sex offence committed in 2017, and his provisional detention was conditionally suspended. In addition, the suspect's brother has been linked to a Turkish extremist or jihadist network. This Turkish network is known as the Caliphate State group or the Kaplan Movement. It is not yet known if the suspect himself played a role within this movement or if he was a peripheral figure.

² The suspect's exact motive is one of the threads being pursued in the criminal investigation by the Public Prosecution Service.

Terrorism-related arrests and detention

In the period under review several arrests were made in connection with jihadist terrorism. These arrests make clear that there are still people in the Netherlands who may be involved in jihadist-related terrorist activities. In February 2019 a 48-year-old man was arrested in the province of Overijssel on suspicion of preparing a terrorist act. He was found to have a firearm and ammunition in his possession. He is believed to be a supporter of ISIS and its jihadist ideology. This case shows once again that potential jihadist attackers can be any age. In March 2019 a Dutch man of Somali origin was arrested in the city of Breda on suspicion of involvement in terrorism. He is alleged to have been involved with the al Qa'ida-affiliated group al Shabaab in Somalia, in 2017. He was released on parole pending his trial. In late April a 37-year-old man was arrested in the city of Heerlen. He is believed to subscribe to jihadist ideology and was allegedly trying to procure firearms. On 21 May a 47-year-old Syrian with a temporary asylum residence permit was detained in the town of Kapelle in the province of Zeeland on suspicion of involvement in war crimes and terrorist offences. He is thought to have been the commander of a battalion of Jabhat al-Nusra, previously al Qa'ida's official branch in Syria.

There are currently several dozen jihadists in prison. Given the size of this group and the limited space available, it may become difficult to keep different categories of prisoners (serious and less serious offenders, dyed-in-the-wool jihadists and neophytes, etc.) from mixing with one another. This increases the chance of interaction and the formation of networks. Some of these prisoners will be released in the years ahead, in most cases on parole.

The Dutch jihadist movement

The Dutch jihadist movement consists of a few hundred people, and has a few thousand sympathisers. The size of the movement has not changed significantly. The movement is a dynamic and non-hierarchical collection of individuals and groups. Women are also a part of this movement, and in many cases they are just as dedicated to the cause as the men. There are few leaders or instigators, and the movement has difficulty making long-term plans of action. The movement may gain strength, however, for example through the arrival or appearance of new leaders or new sources of inspiration, or the emergence of events with mobilising potential, like the war in Syria. There have been heated discussions in jihadist circles, both online and off, on the issue of *takfir* (the practice of branding other Muslims as heretics). This reflects a broader debate within the global jihadist movement. With the fall of the physical 'caliphate', ISIS may have lost some of its popularity among its Dutch sympathisers.

Jihadist families

There are estimated to be a few hundred jihadist couples in the Netherlands and dozens of families where one parent holds jihadist views. It can be assumed that the children produced by such relationships will probably grow up in a jihadist environment. There is thus a possibility that they could be drawn into jihadist networks and possibly pose a threat at a later age. The recent past has shown that jihadists can already play key roles in the movement during their teenage years.

Jihadist travellers and returnees

Since 2017 no new cases have been observed of jihadists travelling from the Netherlands to jihadist conflict zones. As of 1 June 2019 the number of Dutch jihadists present in Syria is 130. Around 90 have been killed in battle. With the loss of the physical territory formerly held by ISIS, a large proportion of Dutch jihadist travellers now find themselves in detention and SDF camps. As of 1 June 2019 there were 55 adults and 90 children in this situation. There is ongoing debate about what to do with Dutch jihadist travellers. Thus far, developments in the camps, including the death of two Dutch children, have not led to an outcry from the Dutch jihadist movement. That said, there have been fund-raising efforts within these circles to try to have women and children smuggled out of the camps. ISIS supporters in prisons or detention camps – both men and women – are generally still committed to jihadist ideology and in this light still pose a threat. Once they are released (or if they escape or are liberated), there is a chance that they will rejoin the organisation or return to their countries of origin.

Elsewhere in Syria there are another 45 adults and 30 children. There are an additional 20 adults and 30 children in Turkey. Thirty adults have joined groups allied to al Qa'ida in Syria. Between them they have around 50 children. For years the number of returnees has been quite limited. As of 1 June 2019 approximately 60 jihadists have returned to the Netherlands. Generally speaking, it is difficult to leave Syria or Iraq: many jihadist travellers do not have the financial means to procure false travel documents or pay people smugglers.

Terrorist financing

Various foundations, active within online Salafist communities and on social media channels that propagate jihadism, have systematically initiated

projects to collect donations for the needy in the Netherlands and in conflict zones abroad where jihadist groups are active, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. Foundations like Babycare and Ibaadu-Arrahmaan provide no information in open sources about the origins or recipients of the goods and donations collected. It is also unclear what contacts they may have in conflict zones in order to transport goods into the area. It seems likely in any event that they are working either in collaboration with or with the approval of jihadist combat groups.

A number of individuals have been arrested in the Netherlands in connection with terrorist financing. Two arrests (of a resident of Utrecht and a resident of Eindhoven) were the result of an earlier investigation into underground banking (*hawala*), whereby thousands of euros were funnelled to fighters in Syria via intermediaries in Turkey.

3. Threat to the West

Number of attacks is still low, but intention to commit them remains

As the NCTV has noted several times previously, there have been fewer jihadist attacks in the West since the end of 2017. This trend has continued in the period under review: during that time there were three attacks in Europe with a suspected terrorist motive: in Utrecht, in the French prison in Condé-sur-Sarthe and in Lyon. There have also been attempted attacks elsewhere in Europe: in Germany, France, Belgium and Spain. ISIS's ability to direct large-scale attacks is thought to have declined dramatically. But both ISIS and al Qa'ida still have aspirations in that regard. Various European security and intelligence agencies have concluded, however, that the jihadist threat is posed not only by ISIS or al Qa'ida, but also by individuals and loose-knit homegrown jihadist networks with international connections, whether

or not inspired or directed by ISIS or al Qa'ida.

Documents have emerged in Syria that reveal that there are plans within ISIS for re-constituting its 'External Relations Office' in Europe, which is supposed to assist ISIS members who are already in Europe with planning and carrying out attacks. ISIS-related networks also pose a threat. With the help of the internet, operatives can approach family members and friends of ISIS fighters and give them instructions on carrying out an attack. It is worth noting that not only the perpetrators of attacks can operate from outside Syria/Iraq but also the planners and 'coaches'.

In time, jihadist travellers could form new networks

In February 2019 two Dutch women were arrested in Turkey on suspicion of being members of ISIS. Their arrest shows that it is not impossible for travellers to enter Turkey from Syria. If more former ISIS fighters (and possibly their wives and children) succeed in reaching Turkey, new ISIS or ISIS-related networks could arise there and thus pose a threat to both the region and to Europe. There are already indications of a growing presence of ISIS contacts in Turkey from Syria. In a propaganda video from late April featuring 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS referred to 'the province of Turkey' for the first time.

Attempted attack on civil aviation: mail and cargo transports are now on terrorists' radar

In 2017 ISIS supporters in Australia attempted to carry out an attack on a commercial aircraft by hiding an explosive device in a meat grinder and smuggling it on board in hand luggage. The attack failed because the hand luggage was ultimately too heavy and could not be brought on board. Information that recently emerged from the trial of the suspects confirms that the device in question had been

transported to Australia in a cargo flight, hidden in welding equipment. This shows that terrorists are looking to use cargo shipments and airmail to target civil aviation. Internationally, this is still recognised as a risk.

Tensions between HTS and THD

Once again tensions have flared up between Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS)³ and Tanzim Hurras al-Din (THD). THD, al Qa'ida's unofficial branch in Syria, and other al Qa'ida elements in that country accuse HTS of working with Turkey.

A video was released on YouTube announcing that 'expats' around Idlib in northwestern Syria – which in this context likely refers to Western jihadist travellers – were trying to cultivate ties with the local population as part of a 'Unity Project'. The project also reportedly aims to offer legal assistance, for example to help travellers defend themselves against charges brought by Western governments or to address the issue of the presumed statelessness of Western minors born in these conflict zones.

Impact of right-wing extremist attack in New Zealand

On 15 March a 28-year-old Australian killed 50 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand during Friday afternoon prayers. All over the world, including in the Netherlands, the attack has had a serious impact on Muslims' sense of security. The attacker's ideological background reflects the popularity of right-wing populism and right-wing extremism in Europe and the increasing threat posed in recent years by right-wing terrorists, both individuals and small cells, as noted in previous editions of the DTN. The New Zealand attack revealed the ideological variety within right-wing extremism (neo-Nazism, the counter-

³ HTS is the successor organisation to Jabhat al-Nusra, which had previously been al Qa'ida's official branch in Syria.

jihād movement, identitarianism) and the increasing influence of the alt-right, coupled with the emergence of a international parallel online world with its own visual language and radicalising discourse. The individual responsible was inspired by a wide range of right-wing extremist ideas that he had mostly encountered online. His actions will continue to be a source of inspiration for various right-wing extremist groups for years to come. The attack has also magnified the danger of copycat attacks in Europe. Two days after the Christchurch attack, a man was arrested in Surrey, England for stabbing another man while shouting 'Kill a Muslim' and 'white supremacy'.

4. International developments

ISIS 'caliphate' has collapsed, but threat remains

In late March 2019, after seven months of fighting, ISIS was finally driven out of the Hajin pocket, the last patch of territory that it still controlled in Syria. The loss of the territorial 'caliphate' is an important milestone in the fight against ISIS. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that ISIS has not been defeated as an organisation; its violent ideology lives on, and the group will do all it can to continue to the fight. This was symbolically underscored by 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's first appearance since 2014, in a propaganda video in which he talks about the global jihād. ISIS still has thousands of fighters and sympathisers in both Syria and Iraq, and has substantial financial reserves. Estimates of these reserves vary widely, from \$50 million to \$400 million.

Sri Lanka

It is not clear whether ISIS was involved in the suicide attacks carried out by residents of Sri Lanka that killed over 250, and if so, how. In any case, the attacks and ISIS's claim of involvement are in keeping with the

image it wishes to project of itself after the fall of the 'caliphate': we have not been defeated; we are still capable of carrying out large-scale attacks; we can strike at Western interests in countries that have no recent experience of jihād terrorist.

Al Qa'ida and allied groups

Al Qa'ida continues to pose a threat. Its leadership encourages attacks against the West, and it is seeking to strengthen the network's command structure.

The increased dominance of HTS in Idlib could prompt the Syrian regime to launch an offensive to bring the province under state control. The upsurge in fighting in Idlib this year could well trigger such a counter-offensive. If such an offensive actually takes place, it may have consequences for the hundreds of Western jihādists currently in the province.

5. Jihadist travellers

Salafist agitators

In early March the NCTV, acting on behalf of the members of the Taskforce on Problematic Behaviour and Undesirable Foreign Financing, informed the Amsterdam municipal authorities about troubling indications identified by the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) regarding the Cornelius Haga Lyceum secondary school. The NCTV's letter, which spoke about hidden intentions, dubious connections and the involvement of political Salafist administrators and instigators in and around the school, sparked a great deal of public debate, with a particular focus on this educational institution.

The manner in which both school administrators and Salafist agitators defended the school, and the language they used in doing so, demonstrated the very thing the government had been warning about: namely, that the school's leaders were not seeking to

build ties with society but rather cultivating an atmosphere of antagonism and intolerance. On the other hand, in response to the letter, a number of Islamic organisations issued a joint statement in which they distanced themselves from the school's conduct and called on the school administrators to step down. Parents and Islamic organisations have once again highlighted the need for a wider range of options when it comes to Islamic secondary education.

Amplifying divisions

Salafist doctrine and ideology can lead to anti-democratic and anti-integrationist tendencies. The active promotion, encouragement and dissemination of these doctrines can contribute to polarisation and eventually radicalisation, especially among children and young people. The extracurricular history programmes taught by various Salafist organisations centre on the glory of Muslims in their historical wars against Christians, Jews and other 'infidels'. The parallels that are drawn between the early period of Islam, when Muslims were in the minority, and Muslims' current minority position in the West can amplify divisions between Salafists and others. Extremist preachers' particular spin on historical battles and their penchant for translating them into the present-day political and social context could lead to the legitimisation of violence against non-Salafists. The conclusions attached to the specific explanations of the teachings influence the packaging of extremist ideas.

Right-wing extremism and far-right activism

As a result of the attacks in Christchurch and various links between the Australian right-wing perpetrator and Europe, the media and others have been paying more attention to the nature, seriousness and size of the right-wing extremist movement in the Netherlands. The Dutch right-wing extremist scene has remained as it was

before the Christchurch attacks: marked by fragmentation, weak leadership, personal animosity and the lack of a consistent organisational form. The right-wing terrorist attack by this lone actor does, however, illustrate the danger posed by a polarised public debate on individuals of this kind. Within the Dutch context the AIVD and the NCTV have previously warned about the danger of individual right-wing terrorist sympathisers who can become 'activated' by the ever more aggressive and inflammatory online international discourse of the alt-right and others. Small right-wing extremist groups are focusing mainly on intimidating and radical protest actions, causing concern in Muslim communities.

Left-wing extremism and far-left activism

During the provincial council elections there were a number of acts of vandalism and threats. In early March activists from the Links Anarchistisch Front (Leftist Anarchist Front, LAF) protested in various places in the north of the country against the Freedom Party (PVV), which they regard as racist and fascist. The group claims to have a 'strong affinity' with the Earth Liberation Front (environmental/climate activists) and the Animal Liberation Front (animal-right activists). This is striking because, previously, these types of protest actions were mostly the work of the AFA (Anti-Fascist Action). Further protest actions have been announced against local, regional and national politicians whom the LAF regards as 'right-wing extremist' or 'racist'.

The electoral victory of the Forum for Democracy (FvD) led to various reactions from left-wing extremists. At an anti-racism demonstration in Amsterdam a female protester chanted the words, 'If you want to shoot Thierry dead, say bang.' This type of language at a demonstration held a few days after the FvD's significant electoral victory called to mind the atmosphere around the time of the assassination of

Pim Fortuyn in 2002. The woman was sentenced to 100 hours of community service for inciting the commission of acts of violence against public authority and making threats. Although this was the act of a single individual, it is noteworthy that the AFA and other left-wing extremist groups did not openly denounce the woman's statement. This could indicate that a segment of the far left is in favour of taking a more aggressive stance. On the other hand, others are calling for alternative action and urging a rejection of violence and threats. Yet it remains unclear what modus operandi left-wing extremists will adopt for their protest actions; the scene is simply too divided to be certain.

The boundary between legal activism and extremism

Wind farms

Resistance to the building of wind farms in the Netherlands is not inspired or driven by any specific ideological movement. In many places members of the public are voicing their objection to the construction of wind farms in a lawful and democratic manner. At the same time, the unlawful protest actions of a small group of anonymous individuals against the construction of wind farms in the provinces of Drenthe and Groningen, which was previously noted in DTN49, have continued in recent months and even become more aggressive. Facing threats and fearing for the safety of their companies and loved ones, two businesspeople pulled out of wind farm projects, causing losses of hundreds of thousands or even millions of euros. Now that such extremist tactics have proven to be effective, it is possible that they will be employed again in the future. Given the seriousness of the incidents in question, the police set up a large-scale investigation team to find out who sent the threatening letters to these executives. This has led to multiple arrests.

Boxtel

In May around 150 protesters from the group Meat the Victims staged a daytime protest, occupying a pig farm in Boxtel for several hours. This remarkable protest was something of a first in the Netherlands, in light of its international and overt character. In the end 76 protesters were arrested, and the situation became even more heated due to spontaneous counter protests by local farmers. This protest, which combined lawful and extremist elements, differs from the various animal rights/welfare protests discussed in previous DTNs. These earlier protests largely stayed within the bounds of the law. Unlawful protests of this type usually involve breaking into an animal facility to film alleged animal rights abuses. Farming families feel deeply threatened by such actions, which often target their homes.

Environmental protests

During the current DTN period, various groups and individuals in the Netherlands have engaged in lawful forms of protest (e.g. demonstrations and the circulation of (online) petitions) in favour of better climate policy. Another striking new international actor within the Dutch environmental activist scene is Extinction Rebellion. This group calls for civil disobedience, and its members are prepared to be arrested during their protests; at the same time, it explicitly opposes violence. As with Meat the Victims, the modus operandi used by Extinction Rebellion involves generating as much media coverage as possible by staging attention-grabbing protest actions.

Polarisation

The outcry over the Cornelius Haga Lyceum was framed by a number of prominent Salafist instigators as an attack on Islam by the state. In their view the government is systemically taking anti-Islam measures in order to make it impossible for Muslims to exercise their fundamental rights. Within the Muslim community itself,

people who disagree with Salafists are denounced as heretics. The practice of heightening divisions can serve to drive social groups further and further apart. In fact Salafists use the same conceptual repertoire as right-wing extremist movements: both talk about

the formation of a community on the basis of a shared cultural identity, the exclusion of the 'other', the rejection of individual rights, freedom and democracy, and the restoration of the in-group's former glory while nurturing dreams of new wars and conquests.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands uses a system of threat levels that indicate the likelihood of a terrorist attack. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) publishes the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) three times a year. The DTN presents a broad outline of the threat to the Netherlands posed by domestic and international terrorism. The DTN is based on information from the intelligence and security services, the police, public sources and foreign partners, and on analyses by embassy staff.

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