



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Security and Justice

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 47

March 2018

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Current threat level: Substantial



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. Jihadism remains the principal terrorist threat to the Netherlands. This threat is posed by both al Qa'ida and ISIS.



1. General threat level

The fall of the territorial ISIS 'caliphate' is an important milestone in the fight against this terrorist group. It became clear during the period covered by this DTN that the threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria is changing as a result.

Although ISIS continues to exist as a terrorist group and still seeks to carry out attacks or have others do so, the group has undeniably been weakened by its loss of territory. More terrorist attacks were committed in Western Europe in 2017 than in 2016, but the trend seems to have reversed since October 2017, as scarcely any jihadist attacks have been committed since then. The months ahead will show if this is an enduring trend. It should be noted that in the past few months people continue to be arrested in Europe on suspicion of being involved in preparing attacks. This shows that jihadist attacks remain a threat. The current situation in Syria and Iraq remains highly volatile. ISIS and other jihadist groups have made clear that they will continue to seize every opportunity to benefit from the present instability.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

The existence of a Dutch and Dutch-speaking jihadist movement has a major impact on the conceivable

terrorist threat to the Netherlands. Now that travelling to the jihadist conflict zone in Syria and Iraq is no longer an option, the Dutch jihadist movement finds itself in a transitional period. As in the pre-2012 period, the movement is focusing more on *dawa* (missionary work) and social activities. These activities help perpetuate the movement by disseminating its ideology and building and consolidating networks. It is troubling that jihadists are attempting to use the internet to exert influence on educational activities aimed at broader Salafist circles. The latter is an obvious target audience: in terms of religious principles and the language used, Salafism and jihadism are quite similar; the two belief systems largely differ on the question of whether violence is legitimate.

Signs that the ISIS propaganda machine is stirring again

As of early 2017 the amount of official propaganda from ISIS fell off precipitously. Initially, this trend seemed to continue during the period covered by the present DTN. For months no new issues were released of *Rumiyah*, a propaganda magazine aimed at the West. At the same time there have been some signs of re-emergence. In November 2017, for example, a professional-looking propaganda video appeared, entitled *Flames of War II*.

Even though ISIS propaganda is less visible on open digital channels, it still

plays a significant role in private online Dutch-speaking jihadist circles. But Dutch-speaking pro-ISIS groups on social media are increasingly having to contend with 'takedown measures', which make it harder for supporters to spread ISIS propaganda in a systematic way. Even so, several hundred supporters continue to show an interest in ISIS propaganda. This propaganda is still regularly shared in small online clusters. Unofficial, homemade propaganda also circulates within these groups. For example, a Dutch-speaking group was active on Telegram during the period under review, sharing tips and information that can be used in carrying out attacks. The fact that Dutch-speaking jihadists are exchanging such information is nothing new. However, the existence of such a chat group confirms that Dutch-speaking jihadists continue to pose a violent threat.

Jihadist travellers and returnees

Travel from the Netherlands to jihadist zones has largely ceased. As far as is known, there have been no successful departures since June 2017. Scarcely any returnees have succeeded in leaving the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq and reaching the Netherlands. As of 1 March 2018, around 300 Dutch people have travelled to Syria and Iraq, approximately 60 of whom have been killed. The number of individuals from the Netherlands who are currently in Syria and Iraq for jihadist purposes is approximately 160. To date, around 50 jihadists have returned to the Netherlands.

To better reflect the current situation with regard to Dutch jihadist travellers, a new category has been added to the table: 'Other'. This category includes individuals who are no longer living in the conflict zone in Syria/Iraq but who cannot (yet) be categorised as 'returnees'. A total of about 30 people fall into this category, most of whom

are living in refugee camps or have been detained in the region.

At least 145 minors with a connection to the Netherlands are currently living in the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. More than half of them are below the age of four. In addition there are at least 30 minors with a connection to the Netherlands living somewhere in the region outside the conflict zone. A small number of minors aged 9 or over are included in the total number of jihadist travellers.

The situation faced by ISIS women and – especially – children, has led to a public debate about the humanitarian and security-related aspects of their situation. These women can pose a real threat, having spent years in a terrorist zone, often functioning as auxiliaries or facilitators. Some young boys can also pose a threat, if they have lived in ISIS training camps or have combat experience.

3. Terrorist threat to Europe

Since 1 October 2017 there have been scarcely any jihadist attacks in Western Europe. This is remarkable because the previous 17 months had all witnessed at least one jihadist attack, with a peak in the summer of 2017. The majority of the 2017 attacks were carried out by lone actors using simple methods, involving knives, blunt objects or vehicles. As far as is known, all acts of jihadist violence that occurred in the West in 2017 can be classified as inspired, rather than directed, attacks. To the best of our knowledge, this is also true for the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils, which were claimed by ISIS.

Due in part to the loss of territory along the Turkish border, which constrained ISIS operatives in their movements, ISIS did not succeed in guiding a single

attack to completion in the West in 2017. It is also the case that many individuals have been arrested in Europe, on suspicion of being involved in preparing attacks both directed and inspired by ISIS. This shows that the threat of such attacks remains.

Because ISIS is for the most part now unable to send people to the West, as a last resort it is relying more often on people already living there, who may already have their trust: networks of family members and friends of foreign ISIS fighters currently in Syria or Iraq. Although this can be seen as a logical evolution of ISIS networks, the deployment of jihadists' family members and friends was not previously part of its strategy for directing attacks.

Instructions for attacks remain accessible

ISIS's territorial losses have limited its ability to experiment freely with new *modi operandi*, but this has not resulted in the loss of knowledge and expertise. ISIS has trained fighters and produced videos and guides (with photos), for example on making explosives, and disseminated them online. Subtitles make such instructions accessible to a wider audience. Coverage by traditional media can increase the circulation of such instructions, which can then make their way beyond jihadist circles. This, in turn, can lead to imitation by other parties.

The al Qa'ida core and its Syrian affiliates also pose a threat to the West

The al Qa'ida core continues to focus on planning international attacks. Through propaganda, members of the group in Iran and Afghanistan/Pakistan are a driving force in inspiring people to implement their international jihadist agenda. Syria is a key theatre of operations for the al Qa'ida core. Al Qa'ida ally Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) holds a strong position in northwestern Syria. For al Qa'ida this region, where

several dozen Dutch jihadist travellers are active, serves as a strategic safe haven close to Europe.

Other forms of terrorism

The threat of right-wing terrorism remains a factor in various Western European countries. Targets include immigrants, refugees, left-wing opponents and buildings associated with Judaism and Islam. The perpetrators are typically lone actors or small cells. This threat is not as great as that posed by jihadists, but it has been on the rise in recent years. This is the case, for example, in France, where right-wing terrorist activity seems to be increasing. In Germany, right-wing extremist violence directed primarily against centres for asylum seekers and refugees has been a regular occurrence for some time. Despite the downward trend in 2017, such attacks continue to happen almost daily.

There was also a right-wing terrorist attack in Italy. In the city of Macerata in early February 2018 an Italian right-wing extremist shot at African immigrants from a car, wounding five men and one woman.

In November, a few days before a state visit to Greece by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, nine members of the ultra-left-wing organisation DHKP-c (Devrimci Halk Kurtuluş Partisi-Cephesi, the Revolutionary People's Liberation Army) were arrested in Greece. Two were Dutch nationals, suspected of plotting an attack on the Turkish president. Both individuals had previously been linked to DHKP-c. Further investigation will have to reveal if there were serious plans for an attack.

4. International developments

Although ISIS has lost most of its territorial 'caliphate', there are still

pockets of ISIS resistance in Iraq and Syria. Most of the remaining ISIS fighters have withdrawn into the border area between the two countries. ISIS also still has networks in several liberated urban centres, including the Iraqi city of Mosul.

The future of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria is unclear. There have been regular reports in the international media about individuals or small groups of ISIS supporters who fought in Syria and Iraq and are now heading to other countries, such as Afghanistan or Libya. The authorities have not yet been able to confirm this, and it is therefore likely that a relatively large number of foreign fighters remain in Syria and Iraq.

Returning foreign fighters and other ISIS veterans coming to Europe pose a long-term threat. They may have joined or may intend to join new transnational networks, made up of veterans of the jihad in Syria and Iraq. Experience has shown that such networks can play an important role both in disseminating jihadist ideas and in facilitating and preparing attacks.

There are valid concerns that the hundreds of ISIS fighters being held in camps by Syrian Kurds will radicalise further. The camps also provide an ideal breeding ground for jihadist networks, which may develop further after the fighters' release. History shows that such security risks should be taken seriously.

Regional instability, which remains at a high level, may play into the hands of ISIS and other jihadist groups. ISIS may regain strength if military pressure on the group lets up. This has become apparent in the wake of Operation Olive Branch, a military ground offensive launched in January 2018 by Turkey on Afrin, a city and district in northern Syria. The city is controlled by the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia. Turkey regards the YPG as a Syrian branch of the terrorist

separatist movement PKK and therefore defends the offensive as a justified measure against terrorists. The Turkish military operation has not only heightened tensions; it has also weakened the anti-ISIS coalition. Not only ISIS, but also other jihadist combat groups like HTS may be able to profit from the Kurds' shift in focus to self-defence, and regroup.

Developments in the Middle East and Africa

ISIS's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria may mean that the threat emanating from other conflict zones will increase. Some foreign ISIS fighters may travel from Syria and Iraq to other jihadist conflict zones. With their combat experience and possible contacts with jihadists elsewhere in the world, these fighters could end up strengthening local ISIS branches. However, aside from a small number of mostly unconfirmed reports, this does not appear to have happened on a large scale.

ISIS's influence is minimal in Somalia, with the exception of Puntland, a semi-autonomous region. The airstrikes on ISIS in Somalia, begun in November 2017, will increase pressure on this group and may exacerbate the problems it faces. As yet, there are no indications that ISIS's international agenda is a priority for the ISIS militia in Somalia. Nor are there indications that ISIS is using Somalia as a base for preparing attacks on the West.

Since the fall of Sirte in December 2016, ISIS in Libya no longer controls a defined territory. In the first half of 2017 they attempted to regroup further inland. Due to the ongoing power struggle in Libya, the country will remain a refuge for jihadists. However, Libya does not appear to exert the same pull on Western fighters as Syria does. Neither ISIS in Libya nor local al Qai'da allies have promoted their fight in Libya as effectively as groups in Iraq and Syria. In addition, Libya holds less

religious significance for jihadists, and with its relatively homogeneous society, it lacks the kinds of sectarian divides that can be exploited to recruit jihadists.

The ongoing war and the power vacuum in Yemen have created a favourable climate for jihadist groups. Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in particular is benefiting from the war, and continues to call for attacks in the West.

In Egypt, Wilayat Sinai is currently the largest and most active jihadist group. It is primarily active in the northeastern part of Sinai, where it is embroiled in a protracted guerrilla war against Egyptian security forces. Despite the prolonged and large-scale military offensive against the group, Wilayat Sinai is still capable of carrying out armed attacks. The attack on a mosque in Bir el Abd on 24 November 2017, which killed over 300 people, shows that the group targets not only the security forces but also the local civilian population. Though ISIS has not officially acknowledged that it was behind the attack, the group has nonetheless been held responsible for it.

Afghanistan

Despite the pressure exerted by Afghan and American security forces on ISIS Khorasan – as the ISIS province in this region is known – ISIS and pro-ISIS groups have managed to maintain their position. However, the Taliban remains the most powerful movement that carries out attacks targeting the Afghan government and Western influence in the country, sometimes with the help of sympathetic networks. That said, in some areas the movement now faces competition from ISIS Khorasan. This rivalry is one of the reasons for the increase in the number of attacks in Kabul, which have also hit Western targets. Afghanistan would seem to be in the grip of a new wave of violence, and this may inspire more followers to

join jihadist groups in Afghanistan such as al Qa'ida.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Radicalisation

The radical Hague-based Salafist preacher Fawaz Jneid, who is subject to a banning order covering two parts of the city, is still vocal in criticising his opponents. This is apparent from a long video in which he condemned mayor of Rotterdam Ahmed Aboutaleb as a hypocritical, opportunistic and apostate Muslim who undermines the Muslim community and its interests. There are persistent concerns that this kind of language may boost Jneid's influence among radical young people. By condemning Aboutaleb as an apostate he may also incite people to take the law into their own hands.

Extremism

The violent threat posed by the far right in the Netherlands is relatively limited. Unlike in surrounding countries, particularly Germany, there are no indications in the Netherlands of far-right terrorist structures or groups. If it occurs, any serious far-right violence is most likely to come from lone individuals or small, swiftly radicalised groups.

The racist group Erkenbrand is a clear exception to the stagnating growth numbers for far-right groups. This group is attracting more and more interest, with over 200 people attending its annual conference. In light of the group's anti-democratic ideology, Erkenbrand poses a threat to the democratic legal order. Some Erkenbrand supporters also believe in an imminent race war, as do other radical groups. Although the organisation's focus is on giving lectures about its radical ideas, there is a risk of further radicalisation. The 'alt-right' movement and Erkenbrand, which can be seen as its Dutch exponent, have

also brought anti-Semitism back to the forefront in far-right circles.

The period under review has been relatively quiet in terms of far-left protests and demonstrations. Far-left group Anti-Fascistische Actie (AFA) held a number of counter-demonstrations at rallies by the far-right activist group Pegida Nederland. Far-left activist groups still emphasise that they will continue their fight against perceived violence, repression, racism and ethnic profiling on the part of the police. The struggle against what they perceive as the far right is another key motivation for far-left protests. Over the past few months asylum rights extremists have carried out very few unlawful protests. For asylum rights extremists, fighting what they regard as inhumane asylum and immigration policy in the Netherlands and the EU remains a priority. The authorities must continue to take account of the possibility of intimidating and covert unlawful acts, such as online threats, naming and shaming, graffiti, vandalism and 'home visits' targeting politicians, institutions and businesses that are responsible for drawing up, implementing and facilitating asylum and immigration policy.

A post on Facebook calling for the murder of St Nicholas led to a public outcry. The Public Prosecution Service has launched a criminal investigation, on the grounds of incitement, against the leader of the far-left anti-racist and anti-colonial activist group De Grauwe Eeuw (The Grey Age), who was responsible for the post. There was no terrorist threat during the St Nicholas period. Nor are there any indications at present that members of the group intend to commit acts of violence against people. With fewer than 10 members the group is small in size.

Radical climate activists have announced that in 2018 their protests will mainly focus on Groningen, where

natural gas extraction has caused earthquakes. Following a relatively severe tremor in Groningen on 8 January 2018, radical activist groups from Groningen and national radical activists (including climate activists) have shown a greater willingness to take action and work together.

Polarisation

The DTN addresses negative forms of polarisation because these can set the stage for radicalisation processes. The topics discussed below have been chosen because they have given rise to a polarised debate.

In the last few months of 2017 the public debate about Salafism flared up. At one extreme of this debate, some called for the prohibition of lectures by Salafist preachers and more forceful repression of all forms of Salafism, while on the other side there was a tendency to regard Salafism as simply a particular brand of orthodoxy.

Although the debate surrounding asylum seekers appears to have died down, the presence in Europe of a relatively large number of mainly Syrian asylum seekers entails a number of risks and problems. There is a real chance that some asylum seekers will radicalise after arriving in Europe. In 2017, attacks were carried out in various European countries by people who had become radicalised while in Europe. Another concern is that refugees from conflict zones may have been exposed to violence and traumatised in their country of origin. This could present risks on their arrival in Europe. A third possible issue is that refugees may be importing political, ethnic or religious conflicts from their countries of origin, without taking account of – or not being sufficiently aware of – the political history and cultural sensitivities in their new country of residence. An example of this occurred in Germany, where pro-Palestinian protesters burned Israeli flags and chanted anti-Semitic slogans at a protest against US President

Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Germany reacted in shame and shock at this display of anti-Semitism.

Often the responses to incidents involving asylum seekers, refugees or migrants stem from an existing fear in society of foreigners or a sense that asylum seekers are being given special treatment. Expressing such sentiments in political terms may further harden the public debate and increase polarisation and lack of understanding between different segments of society. That said, the Netherlands has not seen any violent incidents directed at asylum seekers like in Germany.

In 2017 the figure of Black Pete once again proved divisive. The divisions could be observed not only between those who see Black Pete as a symbol of racism and those who do not, but also to some extent between the Randstad conurbation in the West and the rest of the country. A roadblock set up by group of Frisians on the A7 motorway to stop a bus from Amsterdam carrying opponents of Black Pete to the St Nicholas parade led to outrage at the group taking the law into their own hands. On the other side of the divide there was anger about accusations of racism and changes to Black Pete's appearance imposed by 'the Randstad'.

In various European countries, the approach to combating incitement to hatred has led to a polarised debate. In both Germany and France legislation is being prepared in an attempt to combat hate speech and fake news. This legislation is controversial and is viewed, particularly in right-wing populist circles, as a limiting the freedom of expression and as 'censorship by the European elite'. Such sentiments are becoming more and more common in the Netherlands too.

The Turkish assault on Afrin has also caused tensions in Europe to rise. Several protests were held in Europe in response to the attack, by both Kurdish and Turkish organisations. Some of these protests turned violent. A protest by Kurds at Hanover airport in Germany degenerated into fights with those waiting at the Turkish Airlines desk. A similar protest at Schiphol Airport took place without incident. However, in Rotterdam the Geylani Hizmet Vakfi mosque was defaced and damaged.

The tense political situation in Turkey has caused concern among Dutch people of Turkish descent. There has been controversy around Diyanet, the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs, following reports in the European media about its involvement in efforts to identify opponents of the Turkish government.

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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