



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Justice and Security

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 48

September 2018

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Current threat level: Substantial

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The threat level for the Netherlands is set at 'substantial', level 4 on a scale of 1 to 5, which means that the chance of an attack is real. Although the threat level has been at 'substantial' since 2013, the threat situation has changed significantly in the meantime. These changes were previously identified in the 47th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment (DTN) for the Netherlands.



1. General threat level

On 31 August of this year a 19-year-old Afghan national stabbed two random passers-by at Amsterdam Central Station. On the basis of an initial investigation it was concluded that he was motivated by terrorist aims. This act illustrates the threat to the Netherlands. Overall, however, the number of attacks in Europe, particularly attacks inspired by ISIS, has fallen sharply since October 2017. This drop, viewed in connection with ISIS's substantial territorial losses, means that – for the time being at least – ISIS poses less of a threat. The al Qa'ida core continues to pose a threat. With ISIS having taken centre stage over the past few years, al Qa'ida has been operating in the background, building an infrastructure in Syria which allows it to threaten Europe. The last attack mounted in Europe by the al Qa'ida core was in 2005. To some extent the threat situation has changed for the better, particularly in comparison to the situation in 2015-2016.

However, the threat level has not yet fallen back to where it was prior to 2013: it remains substantial. There are two important reasons for this. Firstly, there are international jihadist networks operating in this country, some with links to ISIS or al Qa'ida, that may carry out attacks in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe. Jihadist terrorists

need not be from the Netherlands in order to mount an attack here. The arrest of two terrorism suspects in Rotterdam in June 2018 shows that this threat is still real. The terrorists are thought to have been planning an attack in France from the Netherlands, but were also considering targets in the Netherlands. Other terrorism-related arrests made in the Netherlands during the period under review make clear that there are still people in the Netherlands who may be involved in terrorist activities connected to jihadism. The second reason that the threat level remains at 'substantial', is that the threat posed by the jihadist movement in the Netherlands remains undiminished. After all, according to jihadist ideology, violence is justified for the achievement of religious and ideological objectives. Some adherents of the movement are involved in planning attacks in the Netherlands, but so far this has not led to a concrete threat.

Yet the movement is currently in a process of reorientation. In recent years the focus had been on travelling to and fighting in jihadist conflict zones in Syria, but it has now shifted towards activities relating to da'wa, or spreading the jihadist message. This can happen in public view, in the form of street proselytising, but it is more commonly – and less visibly – done online. But regardless of the form they take, the aim of these efforts is to attract more

followers to the movement. Jihadists often work with other Salafists in this regard, giving them access to a much wider group of potential followers. This is another key aspect of the threat situation: the non-violent dissemination of a message of hate against the West and the constant undermining of our democratic values and the rule of law. It should also be noted that the Dutch jihadist movement is many times larger than it was before the war in Syria. There is a strong sense of solidarity among jihadists, who are often in touch with fellow extremists in other countries. Around 2010 it was concluded that the movement no longer posed much of a threat. At the time nobody imagined that jihadism in the Netherlands would grow as fast as it did and that eventually around 300 Dutch jihadists would travel to jihadist conflict zones. Such long-term developments are taken into account when setting the threat level, in addition to the possibility of concrete acts of violence.

2. Terrorist threat to the Netherlands

Jihadists in the Netherlands pose a violent threat. In the past few years Dutch jihadists have been involved in preparing attacks. A small number of them have also considered carrying out attacks themselves. Whether the stabbing in The Hague on 5 May 2018 constituted a jihadist terrorist attack cannot be determined until the perpetrator's motive has been established. He is currently suspected of three counts of attempted murder or manslaughter, possibly with terrorist intent. On the basis of an initial investigation it was concluded that the perpetrator of the stabbing at Amsterdam Central Station on 31 August 2018 had a terrorist motive. The suspect has stated that he acted as he did because 'the prophet Mohammed, the Koran, Islam and Allah are frequently insulted' in the Netherlands.

The Dutch jihadist movement

The developments with regard to the Dutch jihadist movement, as identified in DTN47, appear to have continued. The movement is reorienting itself following the collapse of the ISIS 'caliphate'. Dutch jihadists may be inclined to embrace a 'revenge narrative' that blames the West for the collapse of the 'caliphate'. This narrative may be used to justify attacks and may potentially be exploited by ISIS over a longer period even after the group has lost all the territory it once controlled.

Besides the violent threat, there is also the threat posed by da'wa, which involves activism, educational activities and debates among followers and with outsiders. This mainly occurs online, but da'wa-related activities on the streets are also becoming more common again. These activities are not as widespread as in the period between 2010 and 2015, but with jihadist travellers unable to travel to the 'caliphate' and with the movement in the process of reorienting itself, the focus on public da'wa has increased.

There is a certain intermingling of activities between jihadists and other Salafists. Online and offline, jihadists move in Islamist/Salafist circles without explicitly presenting themselves as jihadists or adherents of a jihadist ideology, and consequently they are not recognisable as such. There are also online and real-world organisations which do not immediately appear to be promoting a jihadist message, but which are backed by jihadist platforms. Examples include organisations which raise money for Muslims in countries like Syria and Somalia.

Following a sharp increase in the number of members between 2013 and 2016, the size of the Dutch jihadist movement is now relatively stable, though its composition is changing. Some people have left the movement, while others have been recruited or have joined of their own accord, many of them family members or friends of existing members. Around 140

Dutch jihadists are still thought to be Syria and Iraq, some with ISIS and others with al Qa'ida allies and other groups. Approximately 30 Dutch jihadists are currently outside the conflict zones but cannot yet be regarded as returning jihadists. In addition to adherents of jihadism, there are also several thousand jihadist sympathisers, and ISIS sympathisers in particular, in the Netherlands. The Dutch jihadist movement is for a large part active online.

Over the next few years a number of jihadists who are known to still hold jihadist ideas are due to be released from prison. Although imprisoned jihadists are not entirely cut off from their social and jihadist networks while in prison, and can thus exert influence throughout the length of their incarceration, their return into society may in some cases create a new dynamic within the Dutch jihadist movement. Some of them are experienced or charismatic figures who can make an impact on the movement, or parts of it. Imprisoned jihadists will also be released in other European countries. For more on this, see the section 'Threat to the West' below.

Jihadists in the Netherlands have maintained contacts abroad for some time. These may be of a personal nature, or they may serve as a way of sharing and spreading the jihadist ideology, or even planning and preparing attacks. Although it is not a recent phenomenon, contacts between Dutch and Belgian jihadists in particular may be getting closer. More broadly, there have been jihadist network structures in Europe for many years which have posed a continuous threat. Among them are transnational networks related to al Qa'ida and ISIS which have connections in Syria/Iraq. These networks can be activated in order to prepare, facilitate and carry out attacks in Europe. Dutch jihadists may be part of such networks, for instance through their contacts with Dutch jihadist travellers in the region. Jihadist networks continue to pose a threat in the short, medium and long term.

Terrorism-related arrests

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 connection with an ongoing criminal investigation into a jihadist who was convicted at first instance in 2017, four people were arrested in April 2018. The criminal investigation into these four suspects is focused on terrorist training and preparations, and incitement to terrorism on social media. In Belgium a man of Serbian origin was arrested on suspicion of planning an attack in the Netherlands and possibly also planning an attack in Belgium. He allegedly had a contact in the Netherlands whom he told about his plans. On 17 June 2018 two men were arrested on suspicion of preparing a terrorist offence and participating in a terrorist organisation. They allegedly planned to carry out an attack in Paris. The investigation later revealed that they may also have intended to carry out an attack on 'security services' in the Netherlands, possibly on a police station in Rotterdam. One day after this arrest, three men whose DNA had been found on firearms discovered in Argenteuil (France) in 2016 were arrested. Previously, on 27 March 2016 (Easter Sunday), several people including Anis B. had been arrested in Rotterdam in connection with this case. On 3 July 2018 the police also arrested a 15-year-old boy and a 27-year-old man who are suspected of inciting the commission of terrorist offences. In July a man from Belgium for whom a European arrest warrant had been issued in connection with terrorism was arrested in Schiedam. At the end of August a man was arrested in The Hague on suspicion of planning an attack on the organiser of a cartoon contest, which has since been cancelled. However, it is not yet clear whether this man has a jihadist background. On 31 August 2018 a 19-year-old Afghan man was arrested at Amsterdam Central Station after stabbing two people. The man is thought to have been motivated by terrorist aims. In a statement he said that the prophet Mohammed, the Koran,

Islam and Allah were frequently insulted in the Netherlands.

Jihadist travellers and returnees

Since July 2017 no new cases have been observed of jihadists travelling from the Netherlands to the conflict zone in Syria and Iraq. As of 1 September 2018 the number of Dutch people with jihadist intentions in the conflict zone is approximately 140. Few if any have been able to leave the conflict zone and reach the Netherlands. As of 1 September 2018 approximately 55 jihadists have returned to the Netherlands. In total around 80 Dutch jihadists have been killed. There are also around 30 jihadist travellers outside the conflict zone, some of whom are in detention camps or refugee camps. They are not counted as returnees. In total there are over 175 minors in and around the conflict zone of whom one or both parents are Dutch nationals. Most of them were born in the conflict zone and are aged 4 or under. Children aged 9 or over who are or have previously been in ISIS-controlled areas are included in the total number of jihadist travellers. Only a small number fall into this category.

In the past few months there have been no significant changes to trends related to jihadist travellers and returnees. The number of returnees is still limited and the prediction made several years ago that jihadist travellers would return gradually still holds: so far this year, on average, one jihadist traveller has returned to the Netherlands each month. Although it cannot be ruled out that some jihadist travellers may have re-entered the country undetected, most returnees have returned to the Netherlands under escort, which significantly reduces the threat they pose. If they are prosecuted and imprisoned, their subsequent release may – as was noted above – give a new impetus to jihadist networks in the Netherlands. It should be noted that

many jihadist travellers who went to Syria and Iraq when the ‘caliphate’ was proclaimed, made a conscious decision to join ISIS. Some of them may have no intention of returning, regardless of the harsh conditions. There are currently no indications that Dutch jihadist travellers are moving on to other jihadist conflict zones.

There has been a debate for some time now about how to deal with female travellers, and their children, who are now in refugee camps in Syria and Iraq. Both the mothers and children could pose a threat if they return. The mothers tend to pose as naive victims who were taken to the ‘caliphate’ by their husbands, but most of them made a conscious decision to go there and are still adherents of jihadism. ISIS has also shown in various videos that it does not hesitate to have children, some of them very young, commit horrific acts of violence. A returnee arrested in France recently stated that ISIS has trained children to mount attacks in Western Europe. According to unconfirmed reports, a group of women and children living in Kurdish reception camps were swapped for a group of Kurdish fighters who had been taken prisoner by ISIS. Representatives of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have denied these rumours, though they did indicate that they would not be able to hold women and children in reception camps indefinitely. At some point they would be released or transferred elsewhere. How this would affect the threat situation is not clear at this time.

Terrorist financing

A number of individuals have been arrested in the Netherlands in connection with terrorist financing. Two men from Deventer were arrested at the end of March 2018 on suspicion of financing terrorism in Syria. It is alleged that from 2015 until their arrest, they used an informal banking system (hawala) to transfer tens of thousands of euros via exchange offices in Turkey to jihadist travellers taking part in the fighting

in Syria. They may have done so at the behest of friends and family members of Dutch jihadists. In June 2018 two brothers from Utrecht and a woman from Alphen aan den Rijn were arrested on suspicion of providing funding to relatives and former relatives who had travelled to jihadist conflict zones. This case came to light because the suspects violated the Sanctions Act.

On 3 August 2018 a Russian man who was wanted by the Germany authorities for participating in a terrorist organisation was arrested at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. He had allegedly transferred several thousand euros to ISIS members in Syria who used the funds to pay for training and weapons. He was handed over to the German authorities on 8 August 2018 on the basis of a European Arrest Warrant.

3. Threat to the West

The ISIS-inspired jihadist attack that took place in Trèbes (France) at the end of March 2018 marked the end of a period that began in October 2017 during which no attacks were committed in Europe. This attack has not altered the sharply downward trend in the number of attacks in Europe since the collapse of the ISIS 'caliphate'. At the same time, this attack illustrates the ongoing jihadist threat to Europe. The attack carried out in Paris in May 2018 was inspired by ISIS. The attack in Liège in June makes clear not only that the threat is still present, but also that ordinary criminals, such as the attacker in Liège, can become radicalised in prison. This phenomenon occurs in many European countries, but rarely if ever in the Netherlands, due to special terrorist wings in prisons, which ensure that radicalised prisoners do not mix with ordinary criminals. In Cologne a man was arrested on suspicion of planning an attack. He was found to be in possession of ingredients to make the poisonous substance ricin and a certain amount of the substance itself. In

addition, the ingredients for an explosive were found. The man had apparently intended to make a bomb with which to disperse the ricin. However, ricin cannot be dispersed using an explosive, since the high temperature would immediately burn up the poison. This was not mentioned in communications about the arrest, and as a result, the discovery of ricin may have caused more consternation among the general public than it should have. The attack on four Western cyclists (including a Dutch national) in Tajikistan on 29 July 2018, which was claimed by ISIS, made clear that Westerners can fall victim to terrorism far outside Europe. In taking credit for the attack, ISIS explicitly stated that it had targeted 'citizens of the crusader coalition', referring to the countries in the anti-ISIS coalition.

The impending release of jihadist prisoners

With regard to the general threat to the West, it should be noted that in a number of countries including Belgium, France and the United Kingdom, dozens of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences in the 2000s will be released in the next one to two years. Between now and the end of 2020, 115 prisoners will be released in France, and in 2018 alone at least 80 will be released in the UK. It is likely that a number of them still hold jihadist ideas, and during their time in prison they may have been able to tap into new criminal or jihadist networks. In the Netherlands, too, imprisoned jihadists are scheduled to be released over the next few years. In the years ahead, former prisoners will play a significant part in the terrorist threat situation, not only in the Netherlands but also in other European countries.

Syria central to threat posed to the West by al Qa'ida

The al Qa'ida core still poses a threat to the West. The essence of the al Qa'ida ideology is to attack the West, as the 'enemy of Islam'. Al Qa'ida still has

networks across Asia, Africa and Europe. These networks may no longer be fully intact, but they can still be used to facilitate and plan attacks. Since the London bombings in 2005, the al Qa'ida core has not succeeded in mounting a large-scale attack in Europe. However, during that time various planned attacks have been thwarted, and small-scale attacks have been carried out by al Qa'ida adherents. With ISIS having taken centre stage over the past few years, the al Qa'ida core has been operating in the background, building an infrastructure in Syria which allows it to threaten Europe.

4. International developments

In spite of severe losses, ISIS still exists. Over the past few months it has become apparent that, as expected, ISIS is pressing on with its jihadist struggle in both Iraq and Syria, by means of insurgent tactics. ISIS has reverted to the tactics it used before the 'caliphate' was proclaimed in 2014, which include hit-and-run attacks, kidnappings and targeted attacks on tribal leaders, as well as on anyone perceived by ISIS to be collaborating with the Iraqi government, and other individuals. The Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have resumed their offensive against ISIS in eastern Syria, following the interruption caused by the Turkish assault on Afrin. In July 2018, the SDF's renewed offensive resulted in the capture of the Dashisha pocket on the border with Iraq. In Syria ISIS now only controls very limited territory in the border area between Syria and Iraq, but in Iraq the group continues to profit from ongoing tensions between the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurds. Partly for this reason, ISIS still has some room for manoeuvre in Iraq. At the same time, the factors that led to the rise of ISIS, such as political and economic marginalisation of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, are still very much in

evidence. There is still a breeding ground for discontent among Sunnis, which an organisation like ISIS may channel and exploit.

Important role for Turkey

Despite regular interventions by the Turkish government – such as the arrest in May and June of dozens of ISIS suspects – ISIS and al Qa'ida still have facilitation networks in Turkey. Due to its geographical location, Turkey remains the principal route for jihadist terrorists travelling to and from Europe. The Turkish government's position with regard to ISIS and al Qa'ida is an outgrowth of Turkey's own interests, which are not always in line with those of the West.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Salafism

For some time the DTN has devoted attention to the threat posed to the Netherlands by Salafism. Over the last few years the NCTV has noted that Salafism and its influence in the Netherlands are on the rise. This is evident from the number of mosques at which Salafists and their ideology have gained a foothold, the large number of itinerant Salafist preachers and the many lectures these preachers give throughout the Netherlands. A key part of the threat posed to national security by Salafism is the fact that a segment of the Salafist movement interprets principles regarding 'purification' of faith and behaviour in a way that legitimises and propagates active intolerance (thus fuelling and reinforcing polarisation), anti-democratic and undemocratic activities, and the rejection of the government. Some members of the Salafist movement may also justify and propagate terrorist violence on the basis of their doctrine. They tend to do this veiled in religious terms.

The growth of Salafism in the Netherlands has been paralleled by the professionalisation of Salafist organisations, which make intensive use of social media to announce their activities. A number of Salafist organisations have become aware that the authorities are watching them and now exercise greater restraint when publishing information about, for instance, visitors from abroad and the substance of their educational activities. In recent years there has been a growth in not only the number of Salafist centres but also the number of mosques under Salafist influence. Some struggling mosques are coming under increasing influence of large Salafist centres and are at risk of being 'Salafised' in the coming period.

Most Salafist preachers in the Netherlands have Dutch backgrounds. The religious message they disseminate may lead to the social alienation of groups and individuals or to open resistance against the authorities and society. Broadly speaking, Salafist preachers can be divided into two types: those attached to Salafist institutions and those who are more independent. There are close ties between these two types. There are also ties between Salafist preachers, on the one hand, and Islamists and jihadists, who also seek to educate people, on the other. Despite their ideological differences and theological nuances, a larger movement with radical views and activities appears to be developing, which is ultimately incompatible with the democratic legal order. This hampers integration, contributes to social polarisation and may create a breeding ground for radicalisation, possibly resulting in violent actions.

Extremism

While Dutch right-wing extremist groups have been involved in intimidating and radical protests, there are no indications that they intend to

use violence. They continue to focus on protesting against the perceived Islamisation of the Netherlands, the arrival of asylum seekers and the perceived loss of Dutch identity. Rechts in Verzet (The Right Resists; RIV), an offshoot of Pegida, is a new group with a small number of members, which was responsible for several intimidating protests during the period under review. In January 2018 the group attracted a lot of political and media attention by leaving a beheaded dummy and a threatening letter outside a mosque in Amsterdam Noord, in protest against the building of a 'mega mosque'. Pegida's announcement that it would barbecue pork outside several mosques during Ramadan also generated a lot of media coverage. It is striking that some far-right groups appear to be gaining confidence and have been bold enough to hold demonstrations in traditionally left-wing cities such as Amsterdam and Nijmegen. This increases the likelihood of violent clashes with far-left counter-demonstrators. For some time it has been believed that far-right violence is most likely to come from lone individuals or small, swiftly radicalised groups. One example of such a lone individual may be the man who was arrested in Schiedam in August after making a threat in his response on social media to the death of a member of The Hague's municipal council for the Freedom Party (PVV).

Over the past few months left-wing protest groups have carried out very few extremist activities. Anti-fascists have largely confined their actions to reactive protests against what they perceive as the far right. These protests included a counter-demonstration by the Anti-Fascistische Actie group (Anti-Fascist Action; AFA) at a Pegida Nederland demonstration and several disruptive protests during the municipal elections in March 2018. The anti-racist activist groups that fight against what they perceive to be racist and colonial symbols have continued their intimidating online and offline protests

directed at government bodies, businesses and organisations in order to get 'colonial' names and statues removed. In a few municipalities these protests have opened up a debate about certain events and names of streets and tunnels or even led to changes being made. Encouraged by such 'successes' these anti-racist groups will not be inclined to refrain from intimidating protests and will likely continue them in the months ahead.

There are other forms of extremism which do not fit into the standard categories of left-wing and right-wing extremism, but instead focus on one specific issue. One example are the anti-wind turbine protests in some parts of the Netherlands, which have radicalised in the past year. Although there is no traditional ideology underlying the illegal actions against wind turbines in the Netherlands, these actions can be classified as extremism due to the political aims. At local level citizens have protested the construction of wind farms by democratic means, but in the provinces of Drenthe and Groningen in particular illegal forms of protest have occasionally been employed. The protests were directed against officials who support wind farms, farmers on whose land wind turbines are being erected and businesses that build and install wind turbines. The tactics used include threats, intimidation and vandalism. Extremist resistance against wind turbines has also occurred in other European countries. In France several wind turbines were set on fire this year, causing millions of euros worth of damage.

Polarisation

Not for the first time, tensions between Turks and Kurds in the region have set off tensions in diaspora communities in Europe. While pro-AKP organisations in the Netherlands expressed support, the Turkish assault in northern Syria sparked almost daily demonstrations over the course of several weeks in

various European countries, as well as some cases of violence against Turkish targets. In several European countries ties between left-wing extremist organisations and Kurdish organisations grew stronger, reinforcing existing solidarity between the groups. It is likely that the PKK will try to use the many Kurdish demonstrations to increase its following among Kurds.

Turkish government action following the failed coup in 2016 may also affect Turkish people in the Netherlands. In April 2018, for instance, the then Turkish deputy prime minister announced that the Turkish secret service had so far 'bundled up' 80 Gülenists from 18 countries and taken them to Turkey, and that it would continue this approach. This may increase concerns among Gülen's supporters in the diaspora, including in the Netherlands, and in any case does little to ease the tensions within the Turkish community in the Netherlands.

Various events have fuelled tensions between parts of Dutch society and certain groups of Muslims in the Netherlands. The approval of a bill to ban clothing that covers the face by the Dutch Senate met with condemnation from some Muslim circles. Various Islamic organisations felt that the Dutch government was guilty of double standards and that the ban confirmed that the Netherlands has an 'anti-Islam policy'. Some feared that this marked the start of the curtailment of Muslims' civil rights. Before the vote in the Senate, a number of imams and organisations, most of them Salafist in nature, issued a statement arguing that the bill was discriminatory and unfair. A cartoon contest previously announced by PVV leader Geert Wilders has been cancelled. Although the international response was heated (and particularly fierce in Pakistan), Muslim communities in the Netherlands remained largely peaceful. However, the contest highlighted divisions between Muslims whose response was moderate and

those with much more radical views, particularly jihadists. Recently, the municipal anti-radicalisation and deradicalisation policies of Amsterdam and Rotterdam in particular have been heavily criticised. The criticism centred on the involvement of municipal officials who come from Muslim backgrounds and therefore have strong roots in Muslim communities. The public response zeroed in on these individual members of staff and questioned their integrity. Some even called for them to be fired. This kind of response can also lead to a sense of exclusion and vulnerability among Dutch people from Muslim backgrounds.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

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