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*Ministry of the Interior and
Kingdom Relations*

The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands

Swarm dynamics and new strength



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Introduction

After two high-profile prosecutions in 2006, for several years jihadism only sporadically caught the public attention in the Netherlands. Radical young Muslims seemed to lose interest in planning terrorist attacks on home soil, instead confining themselves to disrupting public meetings, making provocative statements, organising small-scale demonstrations or trying to join the struggle in other parts of the world. In 2013, however, this picture changed completely within just a few months. Over the course of that year, more than a hundred people left the Netherlands to fight for jihadist groups in the Syrian civil war. The suddenness, speed and, above all, scale of this exodus surprised many; evidently, Dutch jihadism was far more powerful than had generally been assumed. And not only were substantial numbers mobilised to join the fight, but a far larger group of sympathisers enthusiastically encouraged them.

At first sight it would appear that this development has pulled jihadism in the Netherlands out of years of relative torpor. And the emergence of Syria as a new theatre of battle certainly did provide the movement with a significant stimulus, a new focus for its activities and an appealing propaganda theme, as well as a fairly easy-to-reach destination for those wishing to take up arms. In reality, though, the Syrian civil war is just one of several factors

behind the sudden and explosive renewal of Dutch jihadism. Underlying it are developments that have been underway for some time. “Syria” is merely a catalyst which has amplified their effects.

So what are these developments? In 2010 the AIVD published the report *Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands*, describing the state of Dutch jihadism at the end of the first decade of the new century. At that time the movement consisted of a number of small networks, which were relatively isolated and invisible. Few were really active, there was little or no recruitment and several had more or less fallen apart. Although individual members kept alive the theoretical notion that they might undertake jihadist activities in the Netherlands, in practice they showed no real intention of doing so. In addition, there was hardly any international interaction. Whilst there were local “branches” of some transnational networks, in reality these consisted of a few isolated individuals rather than genuine subnetworks. Quite a few Dutch jihadists fostered a desire to fight in a foreign conflict zone, but only a handful ever put that wish into practice. And many of those attempts failed, due either to their own ineptitude or to intervention by the AIVD, the Dutch judicial authorities or their counterparts abroad. There was certainly no mass exodus to theatres of jihad.

It was in 2010 that jihadism in the Netherlands broke this impasse, within just a few years growing into a phenomenon of far greater proportions. A movement more cohesive than before, despite its non-hierarchical, strongly decentralised and horizontal structure. Successful departures to overseas conflict zones, especially Syria, have become almost commonplace. At home jihadism is now remarkably open and provocative, both online and on the streets in demonstrations. No longer is its message by and large passed on in a clandestine manner. Today, potential sympathisers are actively sought out and approached. Compared with the situation prior to 2010, when jihadism was virtually invisible and its adherents led secluded lives, the difference is striking.

The jihadist movement currently has an estimated several hundred supporters in the Netherlands, plus a few thousand sympathisers. A number of the former are intent upon actually joining the jihad. A larger group is active in the online exchange and dissemination of jihadist ideology. And more still are more passive in their empathy with the movement. The number of Dutch-language websites extolling the violent ideals of jihadism has increased significantly since 2013. The propaganda they present is imbued with anti-Western rhetoric. More than 120 Dutch citizens have left to fight in Syria, most joining groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or professing a similar ideology in which the West is seen as the ultimate enemy. Many have been

involved in atrocities. Returning fighters potentially pose a huge risk to the Netherlands itself. Impelled by a new-found hatred for all things Western, by battlefield trauma or by specific instructions from a jihadist force in Syria, they could well carry out acts of terrorism directed against the Dutch government or society or against specific sections of the population, such as Jews, Shi'ite Muslims or Muslim opponents of jihadism.

Alongside these risks associated with participation in the Syrian conflict, the strong momentum the jihadist movement has now gained within the Netherlands is also a cause of great concern. Quite apart from a possible increased readiness to commit acts of violence against our country, there are also the dangers associated with the adoption of other extreme ideas characteristic of jihadism. For example, the notion that "pure" Muslims should reject democracy and the authority of the Dutch government, accepting only Sharia law and not the secular legislation of a democratic constitutional state. Tellingly, Muslims in the Netherlands who openly oppose joining the Syrian conflict and challenge the highly intolerant and antidemocratic dogma of jihadism have found themselves increasingly subject to physical and virtual intimidation. The potential threat this movement poses to the Dutch democratic legal order and society is therefore greater than ever before.

A number of factors lie behind the remarkable recent transformation of the Dutch jihadist movement. To properly understand its current dynamics, it is important not only that these factors be identified but also that their long-term durability and effect be investigated. What are their consequences? What threats and risks are posed by today's jihadist movement, and especially by the large number of individuals actually taking part in the jihad? This report seeks to answer those questions and to explain the dynamics of jihadism in the Netherlands today, an interpretation based upon AIVD investigations as part of its remit under the 2002 Intelligence and Security Services Act (*Wet op de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten*). In this way we hope to provide our government partners with pointers for the development of effective policy to tackle the phenomenon.

About this report

This report takes a systematic approach to the various factors underlying the new dynamism of jihadism in the Netherlands, addressing them in separate chapters. In reality, these factors interrelate in a highly complex manner.

We begin with three chapters on those developments *within* Dutch jihadism which have been primarily responsible for its complete transformation over a remarkably brief period, since 2010. They are described and interpreted first because they have already been underway for a number of years. Only later do we turn our attention to

the catalysing effect of the civil war in Syria, which has been to enhance the impact of those pre-existing trends.

Chapter 1 looks at two such developments. First, the increasing professionalism of Dutch jihadist networks in evading the authorities when arranging travel to conflict zones and in gaining access to like-minded fighting groups and facilitation networks there. And secondly the adoption of activist propaganda methods inspired by examples in the United Kingdom and Belgium.

Chapter 2 explores a third development: the huge advances in the movement's use of social media. This is so important that it merits a full chapter of its own, early on in the report. The prominent role now played by these channels has considerably intensified flows of information and communications within Dutch jihadism, but their impact goes a lot further than that. They have also fundamentally changed the nature of those flows, both domestically and internationally. Specifically, they are now much more horizontal. Where only a few years ago the vertical (hierarchical) flows of online forums predominated, today horizontal (peer-to-peer) channels like Facebook and Twitter are most important.

Chapter 3 describes a key change largely brought about by the increasing prominence of social media. In recent years, the very structure and cohesion of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands have altered substantially. It now has all the characteris-

tics of a swarm. By this we mean that it is highly decentralised, with numerous individual elements that are largely autonomous. Collectively, however, they maintain their cohesion and direction almost as if a single entity, despite sometimes seeming capricious and unpredictable. That common dynamic results not so much from the influence of a few guiding figures as from collective self-governance at the decentralised level. In the absence of a strong hierarchy and leadership structure, the main driving force within the movement is horizontal influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and other like-minded individuals, in both the online and the offline world.

Following this discussion of the internal and structural developments that have so drastically changed Dutch jihadism, in the next three chapters we turn our attention to contextual factors, both domestic and international, that help to explain its recent explosive growth.

One of these is the recent evolution of “dawah Salafism” in the Netherlands, which is the subject of Chapter 4. The AIVD uses this term to refer to those strands of Salafism dedicated to achieving their goal, a society based upon what they believe constitutes “pure” Islam, through “dawah”. That is, preaching the “call to Islam”. Traditionally, dawah Salafists reject the jihadist view that violence is essential. As recently as 2010, the AIVD was able to report that this movement represented an

“alternative” which, to some extent, was helping to prevent jihadist recruitment. Since then, however, that picture has totally changed. Due in part to the emergence of preachers operating outside the established non-violent tradition, dawah Salafism has now become something of a breeding ground for jihadism in the Netherlands.

Chapter 5 examines developments following the recent Arab uprisings, which have fundamentally changed the context of jihadism in Europe as well as in the Arab world itself. The movement has enjoyed a revival in the Middle East in their wake, creating new opportunities for core Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Chapter 6 explains why the civil war in Syria has acted as a catalyst, intensifying the effects of the developments already described to trigger an unexpectedly rapid and explosive growth of jihadism in the Netherlands. It also examines the reasons behind Syria’s current popularity as a destination for jihadist fighters, including its relative accessibility, the ideological context of the conflict there and its sectarian framing as a battle between Sunnis and Shi’ites.

The last three chapters of this report look at the consequences of the developments described hitherto. Chapter 7 sets out the new risks posed by the substantial growth of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands, in the short, medium and long term.

Chapter 8 addresses the decline in resilience to jihadism on the part of the Dutch government, Muslim communities and civil society, as well as providing pointers for the restoration of adequate levels of resilience and resistance. Finally, chapter 9 provides a conclusion and a look ahead.



1. Developments in jihadism since 2010

Summary

The jihadist movement's substantial growth in the Netherlands in 2013 was anything but spontaneous. In fact, it was preceded by a number of significant developments. Surreptitious and largely hidden, the first of these was a process of change within the country's local jihadist networks. Having long been unsuccessful in establishing relationships among others with their counterparts in Pakistan and Somalia, they at last engaged with both facilitation networks and active fighting groups in conflict zones. They also become more and more able at evading the authorities when arranging travel to those regions. Alongside this professionalisation of their internal organising ability came new means of propagating "dawah" (the call to Islam) and jihad. These were inspired by examples in the United Kingdom and Belgium. Thanks to the use of techniques like demonstrations and leafleting to spread a provocative message openly, these groups became better able to mobilise others and to attract new recruits.

Dutch jihadism breaks an impasse

In 2010, in the report *Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands*, the AIVD was able to state that Dutch jihadism at the end of the first decade of the new century was in regression. The movement at that time consisted of a number of small, isolated networks that were largely invisible and inactive. New recruits were few and far between, and several of the groups had more or less fallen apart. Moreover, Dutch jihadism had little international engagement. Whilst some individuals fostered a desire to fight in a foreign conflict zone, only a handful were able to put that wish into practice. Attempts to reach such regions often failed or were abandoned.

From late 2010 onwards, however, Dutch jihadism began to undergo a process of far-reaching change. At first this was surreptitious and hidden, but later it became increasingly visible. And within three years it had transformed the movement from a small cabal into a far more substantial phenomenon. Two principal factors were behind this development: internal professionalisation and the adoption of open and provocative activism.

Internal professionalisation

The professionalisation first really set in motion towards the end of 2010 was primarily the product of trial and error.

Several Dutch jihadists had made attempts, mostly unsuccessful, to reach foreign conflict areas. This had brought them into contact with the police and judicial authorities, an experience that enabled them and other members of their networks to better prepare and carry through subsequent travel plans. The result was an improved *modus operandi*. For instance, they learnt to disguise the outward journey as a holiday or business trip by buying return tickets. They also obtained new travel documents, not blacklisted by international authorities. Eventually, these tactics allowed several Dutch jihadists to join groups active in Pakistan and Somalia. In the process, the local networks in the Netherlands improved and expanded their knowledge in respect of suitable routes and the like. They quickly gained relevant international contacts, too.

Open and provocative activism

Alongside its professionalisation, Dutch jihadism experienced a development that changed both the nature of its activities and its network structure. Adherents became more willing to operate openly, taking up methods already used by other activists. With provocative propaganda in a leading role. Their principal examples were fellow jihadists in the United Kingdom and Belgium. Since the 1980s the UK has harboured an active Islamist movement propagating an antidemocratic, intolerant and sometimes explicitly violent ideology. At its heart is the now banned group Islam4UK, previously known as Al-Muhajiroun, Al-Ghurabaa and Muslims

Against Crusades. Its most familiar faces are Omar Bakri (currently resident in Lebanon) and Anjem Choudary, who acts as its spokesman. Modelling itself closely on this British movement, Sharia4Belgium was active in Belgium for several years but subsequently disbanded itself in a blaze of publicity.

In the Netherlands, these British and Belgian examples inspired the foundation of Shariah4Holland and Behind Bars/Street Dawah (Straat Dawah). The latter group, especially, was in close contact with members of Sharia4Belgium (see the separate text at the end of this chapter). By making use of activist techniques like demonstrations and leafleting to disseminate provocative jihadist propaganda openly, these groups were able to mobilise some fellow Muslims and attract new recruits. Many young people, in particular, found a way of venting their jihadist ideals through such activities.

The new groups also put various small and, in themselves, insignificant Dutch local networks in contact with one another. Some individual members have stayed in touch ever since, forming the basis for the current jihadist movement in the Netherlands. The rise of the social media, fuelled by the increasing popularity of smartphones, has also contributed. Online jihadist communities have been formed on Facebook, and participants in demonstrations from different parts of the country have communicated using mobile chat apps.

At first it was not clear what direction this new activist movement would take. Depending on the groups, by and large their public message kept within the boundaries allowed by Dutch law. As did the methods used to disseminate it. Nonetheless, jihadist rhetoric and symbolism were used openly. The movement was led by jihadists, and it attracted supporters of the jihad. But there were no signs of any intention to commit acts of violence, and for a long time departures to join the struggle elsewhere were rare. Only with the emergence of Syria as a theatre of jihad did attention finally shift from dawah to actual participation in the “holy war”.

Shariah4Holland is currently dormant. Behind Bars/Street Dawah ceased its activities at the end of 2012. This coincided with the first wave of jihadist departures from the Netherlands to Syria, the success of which was probably attributable to the close contacts between Behind Bars/Street Dawah and Sharia4Belgium. Individuals associated with the two movements were at the heart of that sudden exodus. But it did not end the openly provocative actions in the Netherlands. In September 2013, for example, several dozen youths from various parts of the country waved a jihadist flag on a football pitch in The Hague. That gathering was organised on social media, and photographs of it were posted online together with a message of support for the militant fighters of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL).

Even without the organisational backing of groups like Shariah4Holland and Behind Bars/Street Dawah, then, it is evidently still possible to arrange provocative activities attracting participants from throughout the Netherlands. The social media play an important role here, so the next chapter explores their widespread use within the jihadist movement today.

Behind Bars/Street Dawah: an example of activist influence

Behind Bars was one of the more successful jihadist activist movements in the Netherlands. Its forerunner, Team Free Saddik, was formed early in 2011 in The Hague to publicise the fate of Saddik Sbaa, a Dutch jihadist who had been held in a Moroccan prison since November 2010. After a few months that campaign evolved into Behind Bars, which held demonstrations outside foreign embassies to draw attention to Muslim detainees around the world. In October 2011 it also spoke out against plans to introduce a so-called “burka ban”. Appearing some time later, Street Dawah (Straat Dawah) was another manifestation of the same organisation. It focused upon dawah-related activities, such as street proselytisation and the organisation of lectures.

Behind Bars managed to achieve a number of its objectives. For example, it opened a “clubhouse” in The Hague that hosted youth meetings attended by dozens of young people, including some from outside the city. In the summer of 2012 this was also the venue for a lecture by a well-known Dutch jihadist preacher. The high point in the existence of Behind Bars/Street Dawah was its September 2012 demonstration on Museumplein in Amsterdam, against the film *Innocence of Muslims*, which attracted dozens of radical Muslims and jihadists from all over the Netherlands. Participants chanted Osama bin Laden’s name and waved jihadist flags. For the first time, the general public was able to see that the Dutch jihadist movement had gained a new dynamism.



2. Social media and propaganda

Summary

Together with greater professionalism and a stronger focus upon open and provocative activism, another development has also helped to introduce an entirely new dynamic into Dutch jihadism: the widespread use of social media within the movement. It is not enough to view these media simply as new tools allowing far more intensive flows of information and communications between activists. In fact, their impact goes a lot further than that: they have fundamentally changed the nature of those flows. Where only a few years ago the vertical (hierarchical) flows of online forums predominated, today horizontal (peer-to-peer) channels like Facebook and Twitter are in the ascendancy. Such media allow for a constant barrage of influence, “of many, by many”.

Prominent role

Social media are playing an ever more prominent role in Dutch jihadism. It is not enough to view them simply as new tools allowing far more intensive flows of information and communications between activists. In fact, their impact goes a lot further than that: they have fundamentally changed the nature of those flows. Where only a few years ago the vertical (hierarchical, or “one-to-many”) flows of online forums predominated, today horizontal (peer-to-peer, or “many-to-many”) channels like Facebook and Twitter are in the ascendancy. This has hugely expanded opportunities for interactivity. And, as in other domains, the new flows in jihadism have blurred the lines between sender and recipient, between information “producer” and “consumer”. Some users have managed to secure a position of influence in this

virtual world, even though their role in “real life” is more or less insignificant.

Constant influence “of many, by many”

Jihadists are constantly influencing one another through social media. Young people undergoing radicalisation trawl Facebook in search of like-minded individuals and post jihadist material on their own profiles, thus influencing their own circle of friends. On Twitter, jihadists debate quite openly with each other and with their critics, who often face abuse or worse. They also post photographs of Dutch fighters in Syria on Facebook, which are then shared by members of jihadist communities. Lectures are announced as Facebook events, too, so that potential attendees can see whether people they know will be there as well. The Dutch

jihadist world has become simultaneously large, small and fast-moving. News from the battlefield in Syria, for example, reaches an inner circle in the Netherlands within a couple of hours – and sometimes even in real time – via mobile chat apps, Facebook and e-mail, and is then passed on to a wider group through social media.

Media mix: forums, news sites and social media

The internet has been an important medium for the jihadist movement to disseminate its propaganda for some time now. There are still many active vertical channels, and the quality and variety of the propaganda itself have improved in recent years. It is now available in multiple forms and many languages, with material ranging from the movement's classic written works to sound recordings of lectures and films from the front line. With more professional presentation, all of these have been made more appealing. The jihadist online forums – some public, some “hidden” – stand apart in this overall picture because they provide both one-way vertical traffic and opportunities for horizontal interaction. They have lost some popularity with users, however, in part because of the strict rules enforced by the moderators. Nonetheless, they remain important as channels for jihadist information and communications. For more details about the role of hidden forums, see the AIVD's 2012 report *Jihadism on the web, a breeding ground for jihad in the modern age*.

Social media have changed the nature of jihadist propaganda. Whilst vertical flows of information continue as before, horizontal ones have gained in importance. And the two forms are bolstering each other more and more. Mainly vertical channels like the website De Ware Religie, for example, make intensive use of social media. That medium – its name means “the true religion” – tracks jihad-related news from around the world and makes it accessible to a Dutch audience. Founded by a small group of activists, including some of the individuals involved in Behind Bars/Street Dawah, it is now one of the movement's leading Dutch-language media. At first sight De Ware Religie does not look specifically jihadist, but more like a mainstream news site with an Islamic focus. Only after reading some of its articles and editorials in depth does it become clear what ideology is really being espoused. And it makes extensive use of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to spread that message further. Followers are urged to contribute to its upkeep by means of crowdfunding.

De Ware Religie does not stand in isolation. The group behind it has opened several jihadist websites, Twitter feeds and Facebook accounts, all of which link to one another. They can thus be considered “choreographers” in the background, exerting some considerable influence over the discourse surrounding the jihadist movement in the Netherlands. Indeed, they are now a driving force because the information they disseminate is discussed, acclaimed, criticised and passed on, 24 hours a day.

More effective propaganda

Social media have enhanced the effectiveness of jihadist propaganda. Their use is almost impossible to guide or control, and their impact is powerful and hard to lessen. As a result, they have made the jihad “experience” more immediate and personal. Fighters and groups in Syria can report directly on their struggle, posting photographs on Twitter and Facebook and videos on YouTube. These present a picture of comradeship that appeals to a lot of young Muslims. Many also remind those viewers of their supposed duty to fight for their faith community. Experiences of battle and of life in Syria are glorified. Photographs and videos showing the use of weapons are popular postings, but there are images of the local cuisine as well. Altogether, these give impression that life in Syria is better and more adventurous than in the Netherlands.

Another piece of propaganda in a different form is the jihadist book *De Banier* (The Banner), written in Dutch by one or more fighters in Syria and published online in October 2013. This work eulogises the struggle there, legitimising it using a framework of reference that is easily understood by readers in the Netherlands. In short, then, the direct way in which social media are being used to communicate about the struggle in Syria and the many Dutch fighters there is fuelling the appeal of jihadism amongst Muslims at home.

A more open movement

Social media have also changed the public face of Dutch jihadism. Increasingly, this has an overt side as well as clandestine one. To some extent, the movement’s open use of such channels is continuing a trend, which was set in motion by organisations like Behind Bars/Street Dawah, with their provocative and self-confident displays. It is also a product of the media themselves, which have openness as one of their core features. The current generation of jihadists know no better; they grew up with the internet and social media. To a degree, of course, this openness is a façade, particularly for seasoned activists. Secrecy remains just as important. Jihadists are security-conscious, and they are well aware that government agencies monitor the internet. They always try to protect crucial information, about individual identities and clandestine means of communication for example, and about activities they fear might be illegal. Experienced jihadists instil this awareness in newcomers to the movement.

The openness in Dutch jihadism may also be explained by its encounters with the legal system. Dutch law seems to give the police and judicial authorities relatively little scope for intervention. A case in point is that of a group of jihadists arrested in Kenya in 2009, close to the border with Somalia. Following their extradition back to the Netherlands, the case against them was dropped due to lack of evidence.

The same happened to several jihadists held in Pakistan in 2011: they were never prosecuted. Such experiences have strengthened the movement's self-confidence and sense of invulnerability. This mood is typified by one triumphant tweet directed at the AIVD by a known jihadist in April 2014. His message is clear: "Greetings from Syria! Monitored intensively for years, sent back 4x and now drinking Pepsi in Syria? Que pasa, what went wrong?"

Faster recruitment

The open and provocative presentation of the jihadist message in the Netherlands has only enhanced recruitment to the cause. For adherents unable or unwilling to join the armed struggle in Syria or elsewhere, such activity provides another form of involvement that allows them to identify themselves as jihadists. It is their way of being part of "Syria", or the "holy war" in general, without actually having to fight. After all, the movement also considers "dawah" – preaching the "call to Islam" – a form of jihad. This parity strengthens the links between those who stay at home to practise dawah and those who leave to fight.

The influx of new jihadists is not merely an online phenomenon, with the newcomers confining themselves to on-screen rhetoric. Online influences work through into the offline world and radicalisation can be a "slippery slope" from internet discourse to physical action, although this is certainly not always the case. By no means does jihadist propaganda on websites and social

media radicalise all who come into contact with it. Just as people are not equally susceptible to online and offline influences in general, so not everyone responds to jihadist material in the same way.

Moreover, those jihadists who do speak out openly often end up exposing their weaknesses to a wide audience. Even within the Dutch movement, there is overt disagreement about which group represents the "true" jihad. This may well temper its appeal to potential adherents. And the same applies to images of atrocities committed by jihadists.

Still, there is no doubt that the chance of coming into contact with jihadism – particularly on social media – has increased substantially in recent years. Consequently, it has become possible for a person to go far more quickly from being a passive recipient of its propaganda messages to a sympathiser and then a supporter. There is also a real danger that such new "online jihadists" might continue radicalising to the point where they actually commit acts of violence or leave for a conflict zone. In fact, this is exactly how many of the Dutch fighters now in Syria came to be there. They evolved very quickly from followers at home to front-line jihadists. The AIVD has established that a large proportion of them have been trained in Syria in the use of weapons and have taken part in actual combat. Some are also known to have been involved in atrocities, such as beheading prisoners.



3. The new structure of jihadism in the Netherlands

Summary

The rise of social media has very much changed the structure and cohesion of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands, which has taken on the characteristics of a swarm. Even compared with the fluid networks of the 2000s, it has few clear leaders and hierarchical structures. A small number of “choreographers” in the background do play a part in shaping its ideological outlook or taking charge of particular activities, but the movement’s decentralisation and the self-guidance practised by its individual members are far more decisive factors. At the heart of this new dynamic is constant mutual influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and like-minded people in the online and the offline worlds. With its grounding in such horizontal relationships, this structure allows large groups to be mobilised quickly. It also makes the movement more flexible than ever before, more adaptable and less vulnerable to outside “attacks”. Were it to lose its “choreographers”, sections of Dutch jihadism might flounder temporarily. But that would certainly not cripple the movement as a whole.

Horizontal and decentralised

For the most part, jihadism in the Netherlands can be characterised as a horizontal and decentralised movement. Everyone is in touch with everyone else, either directly or indirectly. There are many local clusters, which often overlap to some extent. The Hague, for example, has had a loose jihadist “circle” for some years now. So too has Arnhem, a fact reflected in the many media reports in the second half of 2013 about young Muslims leaving the town to fight in Syria. These and similar clusters elsewhere usually comprise groups of friends and acquaintances with a shared belief in the ideology of jihad.

They sometimes form study groups to instruct one another in the doctrine.

Comparable clusters are also found online, in the form of Facebook communities. Again, these may overlap. For example, someone from Arnhem might belong to a group with most of its other members based in The Hague. And one person can be part of several clusters. Combined with cross-cluster friendships or family ties, the many overlaps mean that everyone in the Dutch jihadist community knows everyone else, either directly or indirectly. From time to time, members of different local or online clusters meet in the real world.

Sometimes at demonstrations, but also at events like weddings. These encounters reinforce mutual ties and hence the movement's overall cohesion.

Horizontal influence

A decision to leave the Netherlands and travel to a theatre of jihad is often the result of a group process requiring no central guidance. Particularly through social media, everyone in the movement is able to exert some degree of influence over others. It is this peer-to-peer pressure, by members of a person's own online or offline circle, which is usually decisive. The following example demonstrates how the process works in practice. Not long after the first group of Dutch fighters arrived in Syria, a sheet of paper began circulating amongst jihadists back in the Netherlands. This showed their route, via Turkey, and the telephone numbers of a number of facilitators: Dutch friends already in Syria. Jihadist women in the Netherlands also engage in mutual influence, encouraging one another to travel to Syria to marry a fighter there. Those who have already made the journey encourage their "sisters" back home to come and join them.

Background "choreographers"

Even compared with the fluid networks active in the Netherlands in the 2000s, the country's current jihadist movement has little hierarchy and few clear leaders. There is still a widespread belief that covert recruiters and controllers are at large, manipulating unwary youngsters into

joining their struggle. But the true picture is less straightforward. In only one case has a hierarchical leader been found to have put pressure on members of "his" group to join the jihad abroad.

In the background, however, there are a number of "choreographers" who do exert some influence over the jihadist movement in the Netherlands. For the most part, however, their contribution is confined to the distribution and interpretation of jihadist teachings, news and opinion. Some are individuals, others the groups responsible for influential websites like Ahlus-Sunna Publications, various Facebook pages featuring news from Dutch fighters in Syria and De Ware Religie, which combines jihadist news and views with theological treatises. The same people are behind many of these outlets. Using social media, local clusters quickly spread the information they publish. This maintains the constant flow of jihadist information. Were such "choreographers" to be lost, sections of Dutch jihadism might flounder temporarily. But that would certainly not cripple the movement as a whole.

A few influential jihadists in the Netherlands possess the charisma, the knowledge and the relationships needed to play a role of some significance. Within a circle of friends, they are able to expound an appealing religious and ideological vision or to advise on its "correct" interpretation. They can also lead media campaigns, logistical activities and fundraising efforts.

However, even they rarely exercise hierarchical leadership.

Swarm dynamic

As the description above reveals, the structure of the Dutch jihadist movement has changed substantially in recent years. The current picture is not entirely new, though. In 2006, in the report *Violent jihad in the Netherlands*, the AIVD pointed out that the country's jihadist groups should not be described as "organisations". Their specific cohesion and structure – or rather, their usual lack of these characteristics – made the term "network" more appropriate. It was also noted that they were highly fluid, with a small hard core of permanent members in close contact with one another surrounded at some distance by a group that fluctuated in size and composition. Their leadership was a changeable and situational phenomenon. The movement's current dynamic, characterised by overlapping local clusters, mutual horizontal influence and a few "choreographers", indicates that it is even more fluid now than at the time of the 2006 report.

Today's jihadist movement is best typified as a "swarm", in the group dynamics sense of the word. Underlying human swarm behaviour are dynamic processes akin to those observed in the animal kingdom – in swarms of bees and birds, for instance – although the mechanisms at work are obviously more complex.

The swarm dynamic of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands imbues it with three important characteristics.

1. *Decentralised collective self-guidance*

As already stated, a few "choreographers" in the background play a part in forming an ideological outlook and in leading specific activities. Far more decisive to the nature of the movement, though, is its members' decentralised collective self-guidance. At the heart of this is constant mutual influence by friends, relatives, neighbours and like-minded people, in the online and the offline worlds.

But this does not make Dutch jihadism "leaderless". In the permanent interplay between the influence exercised centrally by the choreographers and the collective self-guidance practised by the members, the latter very much predominates. Nonetheless, loyalty to a number of central figures remains important. This certainly applies to ideological leaders of the international jihadist movement and to the commanders of fighting groups in Syria and elsewhere.

Nor, despite the movement sometimes seeming capricious and unpredictable, does decentralised collective self-guidance mean that it lacks cohesion and direction. All kinds of internal mechanisms prevent members from transgressing accepted ideological and strategic boundaries ("shouting just anything")

or “doing just anything”). Important amongst these are the never-ending online discussions between members, in which they are constantly “sizing each other up” in order to ascertain who really is part of the movement and who is not, and what activities do and do not further its aims. A number of core ideas are consistently reiterated in this discourse, amongst them the principles that violence is an essential and legitimate means to defend Islam, that joining the armed struggle is a personal obligation for every Muslim and that political systems like democracy are inherently pernicious.

Thanks to the intensive ongoing process of mutual guidance and steering at this decentralised level, within a shared framework shaped by the “choreographers” in the background, the movement as a whole displays a high degree of collective autonomy in setting its course. The jihadist swarm may be very dynamic and changeable, but it still knows how to move like one tightly ordered body.

Its swarm dynamic thus makes Dutch jihadism a largely decentralised movement made up of many different components, all of them to a great extent self-guiding. Collectively, however, these maintain their cohesion and direction almost as if a single entity, despite sometimes seeming capricious and unpredictable.

2. *Strong mobilising power*

With its swarm dynamic, jihadism in the Netherlands today bears some resemblance to other mass social phenomena which, through online “hype”, are able to trigger a rapid mobilisation with an eventual offline impact (one example is the so-called Project X “party” in the town of Haren in September 2012, which culminated in serious public disorder). In many cases the escalation is the product of mutual influence on social media – the “of many, by many” effect. A few “choreographers” in the background maintain the impetus by, for example, keeping up a flow of information, but they are not usually the original source of the hype.

Dutch jihadism shares this ability to mobilise its supporters quickly and in large numbers. This is one important explanation for the relative rapid rise in departures to join the struggle in Syria and, once there, for the swift process of further radicalisation towards highly extreme behaviour.

3. *Flexibility, adaptability and resilience*

Its swarm dynamic also makes the movement more flexible, more adaptable and less vulnerable to “attacks” from outside. Compared with the situation only a few years ago, establishing and maintaining contacts and organising activities are now far less reliant upon key individuals or predefined structures.

Everyone involved is able to make contact with everyone else, including fighters abroad, particularly through social media. It has become easy to organise activities like lectures or demonstrations. Were it to lose its “choreographers”, sections of the movement might flounder temporarily, but that would certainly not cripple the movement as a whole. Being less dependent upon key persons has made it less vulnerable. “Gaps” created when, say, people with a specific role in media campaigns, logistical activities or fundraising are arrested or leave for a theatre of jihad are filled quickly.

The upshot of all this is that government attempts to tackle particular jihadist individuals or structures will probably have considerably less effect now upon the movement as a whole than they previously would have done. Particularly when they are one-off actions. The movement can only genuinely be disrupted, in a way that prevents the emergence of new guiding figures and structures, if such efforts are maintained over an extended period. Effective countermeasures today, whether by the authorities or from within the Muslim community, will require plenty of patience.

Hard to count, hard to profile

The true size of the jihadist movement in the Netherlands is difficult to assess. Not everyone openly propounds their ideology, it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between jihadists and non-violent Salafists and internet personalities may be misleading. One individual can assume multiple jihadist identities online, and some of those who espouse jihad on the internet shy away from it in real life. However, the AIVD estimates that there are several hundred core adherents in the Netherlands and a few thousand sympathisers. Moreover, the movement's appeal to some is so strong that they evolve remarkably quickly from followers at home to hard-core fighters on the front line in Syria, where they are prepared to take part in atrocities such as summary executions, mass murder and the beheading of opponents.

It is impossible to present a standard profile of the "typical" Dutch jihadist, or of the "typical" Dutch fighter abroad. The movement's members vary widely in age, ethnic origin, educational attainment, employment background and home situation. Although the majority are men, many are women. A large proportion are in their twenties or thirties, but plenty more are older or younger. Some are minors. Relatively speaking, Dutch Moroccans are overrepresented (the majority of those identified by the AIVD as Dutch fighters abroad are of Moroccan origin). But ethnic Dutch converts to Islam are also found in the ranks of the movement, as are people of Somali, Antillean, Afghan, Turkish and Kurdish origin. Some lack even a basic educational qualification, others are university students or graduates. Many are out of work and living on benefits, but others hold down a variety of jobs. Some come from radical families that share their jihadist ideology, others from secular or moderate homes. The widely-held view that they tend to deradicalise once they marry and have children does not always hold true. Several of the fighters now in Syria are husbands and fathers, and some have even been joined there by their wives and children. That is in defiance of mainstream religious leaders, who stress that jihadist fighters are in breach of Islamic teachings in respect of family obligations – for example, a child's duty to obey their parents and a parent's responsibility for their children.

GELIEFDER DAN DE PROFE



الله
رسول
محمد

Whe are all...
...Awlaqi

Whe are all...
...Bouveri

4. Radicalisation and Salafism in the Netherlands

Summary

Three new developments within Salafism in the Netherlands, and particularly in the strand categorised by the AIVD as “dawah Salafism”, have played an important role in the recent rapid growth of Dutch jihadism.

The first is the parallel growth of dawah Salafism itself, impelled by preachers operating outside the strand’s established framework and with a strong emphasis upon its intolerant and antidemocratic aspects. The second is that these independent preachers and their followers lean far more towards jihadism, thus blurring the line between dawah and jihadi Salafism. Finally, there is the ambivalence within established dawah Salafism in the Netherlands towards the jihad in Syria. Whilst its leading figures here oppose young Dutch Muslims joining that conflict, their close allies in the Gulf states – clerics and charitable organisations – are prominent in inspiring and actually backing dawah Salafist militant groups in Syria.

The result of these developments is that, compared with the situation a few years ago, Dutch dawah Salafism is now more a breeding ground for jihadism than a buffer against it.

Constant radicalising factors

Dutch jihadism’s substantial growth since 2010, from a small-scale phenomenon to a far more extensive one, is not attributable solely to the new developments described in the previous chapters. Existing factors have also played their part. In reports published in the late 2000s, the AIVD stated that the then limited scale of recruitment to home-grown Dutch jihadist networks was due largely to active government policy and to Muslim communities’ own enhanced

resilience to radicalisation and jihadism. But that did not mean that the factors which had contributed to the emergence of home-grown jihadism in the first place had disappeared. Nor have they done so since. There is still growing dissatisfaction amongst young Muslims about their own socioeconomic position and perceived discrimination. There is still a basic desire for self-emancipation amongst young second and third generation immigrants, a need to find their own identity.

And there is still a generation gap between older, more traditional Muslims and young people opting for a stricter interpretation of their faith. The tensions and polarisation surrounding Islam in the Netherlands and other European countries have not disappeared, either. Not only is there still no real prospect of a lasting peace in the Middle East, but new trouble spots have now appeared in the Arab world (these are the subject of later chapters). For jihadists, these international developments only serve to reinforce their view that Muslims all over the world are being oppressed – and that jihad is the only appropriate response.

Alongside these constant factors contributing to radicalisation, new developments within Salafism in the Netherlands also help to explain the revival of Dutch jihadism. Before examining these in detail, however, we first briefly describe the various strands within Salafism and the similarities and differences between, on the one hand, those which reject jihadist violence and, on the other, jihadism itself.

Salafism

Salafism is a current within Islam that places a strong emphasis upon pursuing the “true faith”. Its adherents want to return to the form of the religion they believe was practised at its inception. This means that they reject a whole range of ideas and customs which have become part of Islamic tradition in subsequent centuries. And they oppose all local forms of Muslim observance, dismissing them as relics of

paganism. Within present-day Salafism, three distinct strands can be identified. These are usually referred as “apolitical”, “political” and “jihadi” Salafism. The apolitical or “quietist” variant emphasises the follower’s personal religious life and isolation from non-Islamic society. Political Salafism propagates greater involvement in society and so is more politically engaged. Finally, jihadi Salafism is the principal component of contemporary jihadism.

In terms of their ultimate aim, the establishment of a society based solely upon the tenets of “pure” Islam, apolitical, political and jihadi Salafism differ very little. Unlike their jihadi counterpart, however, the apolitical and political strands argue that the principal means of reaching this goal should be “dawah”: the “call to Islam” in the form of preaching and proselytisation. In this respect, they differ fundamentally from jihadi Salafism. It prioritises the “necessity” of violent jihad, albeit with dawah as an important secondary method.

As both the apolitical and the political strands put the verbal “call to Islam” first, collectively they can also be referred to as “dawah Salafism”. This is the term we use from now on.

Dawah and jihadi Salafism: similarities and differences

Dawah and jihadi Salafism share very much the same intolerant and antidemocratic world view. For both, “tawheed” (the worship of Allah alone) is the central tenet

of their faith. In their interpretation of this doctrine, constitutional democracy is a form of idolatry because it allows man to make laws. In their eyes, only Allah may do that. In also upholding the doctrine of “al-wala wa’l bara” (separation from those who do not follow their strict interpretation of the tawheed), they cultivate an intolerant and polarising attitude towards all dissenters from their view of the world. The dawah and jihadi Salafist messages thus share elements clearly at odds with basic principles of the democratic legal order, including freedom of expression and equality before the law, regardless of sex, race, sexuality or religion.

One well-known dawah Salafist in the Netherlands, for example, has stated explicitly that children at Dutch schools are damaged because they are taught that everyone is equal. The head of a large Islamic institute for education and parenting, this individual claims that Islam teaches the exact opposite. In his view, Muslim youngsters must learn not to make friends with non-Muslims. Dawah Salafists also frequently preach intolerance of Muslims with different opinions. Some have even said openly that Shi’ite Muslims are a danger “to our children, our wives and other individual Muslims”.

At the same time, though, dawah Salafists do tend to apply the articles of faith described above rather more pragmatically than the jihadis. Most, for instance, reject the jihadist habit of accusing any Muslim

who engages with such concepts as democracy of apostasy (“takfir”). Moreover, adherents of the more political wing of dawah Salafism are permitted to adapt somewhat to conditions in the non-Muslim country in which they live, and to be more pragmatic in their approach to democracy. Some of its leaders actually urge their supporters to vote in elections, and some allow them to join political parties. But this does not necessarily mean that they have abandoned their ultimate goal: an Islamic state under Sharia law.

Although only jihadi Salafism explicitly propagates the use of violence, the dawah variant does not always condemn it. But it does impose various restrictions. For example, participation in violent jihad is allowed only after a call to arms by authoritative clerics or the leaders of Islamic nations. And participants must always obtain their parents’ permission. These limitations also effectively preclude dawah Salafists from entering into violent “holy war” against Western countries – although some only reject this notion on pragmatic grounds, viewing such as conflict as inopportune at the present time because the Muslims are not yet strong enough to win it. It would thus do Islam more harm than good. Dawah Salafists often try to differentiate themselves from the jihadis. In recent years, for instance, they have done this by excluding young people with “takfiri” (exclusionist) and jihadist views from their mosques. And in response to the news that Dutch fighters were active in

Syria, they were at pains to reiterate their view of the conditions restricting participation in the jihad. Conversely, many young jihadists have criticised the established dawah preachers for not speaking out unequivocally in favour of joining the struggle.

Nurturing jihadism

In the reports *Resistance and opposition and Local jihadist networks in the Netherlands*, published in 2009 and 2010 respectively, the AIVD was able to conclude that the growth of the Dutch dawah Salafism had stagnated, that its mosques were not breeding jihadism and that, in fact, it represented an alternative which was undermining the appeal of jihadism in the Netherlands. But since then the tide has turned. Now, rather than helping to counter jihadism, dawah Salafism seems to be nurturing it.

As there are both similarities and differences between the two strands, dawah Salafism can foster jihadism as well as hindering it. We look below at three recent developments which have shifted that balance.

Growth and greater intolerance

The first reason why dawah Salafism has become more conducive to jihadism relates to the growth of Salafism in general, a trend the AIVD is increasingly observing across all the movement's variants. More and more mosques in the Netherlands are falling under their influence. This tendency is often reflected in intergenerational conflict, with

older, more traditional mosque goers and governing bodies clashing with youngsters wanting to steer a more radical course. Some management committees have managed to resist these inroads, others have succumbed and been taken over by Salafists. The movement's increased strength is also apparent from the flood of online information presenting its point of view. Anyone seeking material about Islam on the internet – details of correct observance, for example – today finds mainly Salafist perspectives. Many texts that were previously available only in Arabic or English now come in Dutch versions, too, extending their reach amongst audiences in the Netherlands.

The revival is not being driven by the established dawah Salafist centres alone. It is partly a bottom-up phenomenon outside their walls, spearheaded by unaffiliated young preachers. The established centres have worked hard in recent years to professionalise their proselytising activities, an effort largely financed from the Gulf states. They have invested heavily in Islamic charity work, and also continue to teach Arabic and religion. As dawah Salafism is an avowedly missionary movement, it seems highly likely that its particular message is promulgated during these activities.

In response to government policy and pressure from Muslim communities, in the first decade of the new century the major Salafist centres in the Netherlands and their affiliated preachers adopted a more

moderate tone and improved relations with the authorities, the wider community and society as a whole. In recent years it has also become apparent that several of the Gulf states, which supported these institutions financially, have been trying to encourage moderation out of concern for their own relations with Western governments. Over exactly the same period, however, a new group of preachers unconnected with institutionalised dawah Salafism has emerged. Effective at engaging with young Muslims, they are uninfluenced by the established order backed by the Gulf states, which they accuse of conspiring with the West. And they often attract a more radical, more jihadist following. It is they who are the main driving force behind the revival of dawah Salafism.

New groups of young Salafists have begun offering religious education in which young children are taught intolerant, anti-integration and even jihadist ideas. The AIVD has indications that lessons of this kind are being given at various places in the Netherlands, amongst them some community centres. Parents, mosque committees and local authorities seem unaware of their true content.

New Salafist preachers closer to jihadism

The second reason why dawah Salafism's role in fostering jihadism has strengthened is that the independent Salafist preachers described above, and their followers, are much more sympathetic to that cause.

Theirs is a radical message, which not only promulgates intolerance but also smooths over the ideological differences between dawah Salafism and jihadism in respect of the legitimacy of the "holy war". These preachers do not consider themselves part of a movement separate from that of the jihadis (a distinction the established dawah Salafists draw far more clearly). And it is they who exert the greatest influence over young people with jihadist tendencies or sympathies.

As for the young followers of these independent Salafist preachers, it is difficult to tell whether they are adherents of dawah Salafism, of jihadi Salafism or of a combination of the two. This is because the two groups often attend the same mosques, listen to the same sermons, read the same literature and visit the same websites. Moreover, their views on many points are identical.

Ambivalence towards the jihad in Syria

The third reason why dawah Salafism is tending to nurture jihadism in the Netherlands derives from the established movement's ambivalence towards the struggle in Syria. In response to the departure of young Dutch Muslims to fight there, the country's leading dawah Salafists have reiterated their interpretation of the restrictions on participation in the jihad. But, in theory at least, these do not absolutely preclude joining it.

At a conference in Cairo in June 2013, influential dawah Salafists and other Muslim leaders declared the jihad in Syria “in all its forms” a religious obligation. Several of the prominent figures in the Dutch movement, however, have continued to insist that young people from this country are not permitted to travel to Syria to fight. Their principal argument is that that would have negative repercussions for Muslims in the Netherlands and Europe, and for propagation of the Salafist message.

Despite this prohibition on participation, dawah Salafists do not reject the jihad in Syria in itself. Indeed, a number of dawah Salafist militant groups are currently active there. They receive support from several of the Gulf states, often through so-called charitable organisations. For some time now, these groups have clashed regularly with jihadist units. This may explain the Dutch dawah Salafist leaders’ opposition to participation: most of those who go to Syria join jihadist groups there, and so are likely to end up fighting against dawah Salafists.

A number of dawah Salafist clerics based in the Gulf states have made strong efforts to frame the war in Syria as a “final battle” between Sunnis and Shi’ites. Since they have connections in the Netherlands, this sectarian dimension has worked through into Dutch dawah Salafism. Anti-Shi’ite sermons are delivered regularly at its centres, and some of them are available online as well.

A buffer against jihadism?

Dawah Salafism certainly does not lead inevitably to jihadism. As stated above, it has its own counterarguments. But the two movements do have much in common, in particular a shared intolerance and a shared antidemocratic ideology. However, established dawah Salafists have tried in the past to act as a buffer against jihadism by, for example, denying its supporters access to their mosques. More recently, they have spoken out against young people from the Netherlands joining the jihad in Syria. Yet at the same time they remain ambivalent about the legitimacy of that struggle and their support for Salafist groups involved in it.

The buffer role which the established movement claims it can play is now coming under pressure from unaffiliated preachers operating outside institutionalised dawah Salafism – figures who, in practice, seem to make little distinction between dawah and jihadi Salafism. Moreover, many young people with jihadist leanings have turned away from the established preachers. Consequently, the influence they can exert as an anti-jihadist buffer is probably limited.

Role of some mosques unclear

It is not always clear whether a particular mosque has played a part in “jihadising” young people. Nor is it always apparent why groups of radical youngsters choose one mosque over another. It is known that they often avoid traditional, ethnically homogeneous mosques and are prepared to travel long distances to attend one offering a form of worship that appeals to them. And they are quick to change their allegiance if they no longer like what they hear. The fact that many Salafist preachers prefer to give their sermons and religious lessons in Dutch makes it easier for them to attract these young worshippers, for whom that is their first language.

It can also be hard to define exactly what current of Islam a given mosque adheres to. There may well be a difference of religious outlook between the governing body on the one hand and the imam, or guest preachers, on the other. A generation gap is sometimes evident, too, with an older management committee (whose members might not speak Dutch) not fully aware of what younger members of the congregation are doing in the mosque. The financial support provided by some Gulf states may also influence the ideology espoused by the governing body. There could be nothing to prevent young jihadists gathering at a mosque with a moderate committee and imam, although on some occasions governing bodies have succeeded in excluding those with dawah or jihadi Salafist sympathies.



5. The Arab uprisings and international jihadism

Summary

Jihadism's strong growth in the Netherlands can only be properly understood in the context of the changes underway in the Arab world. The recent uprisings there looked at first like a victory for liberal and for non-violent Islamist forces, but it soon became clear that they were in fact spawning a revival of jihadism. The security apparatus in countries like Egypt and Libya partially collapsed, allowing new radical groups to form in peripheral regions. In Yemen and Syria, militant jihadist forces appeared with many of the characteristics of a rebel army. They have helped to expand the operational base area of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates to its greatest extent ever, and created a number of appealing and accessible battlefronts for European jihadists.

The aftermath of the Arab uprisings has provided Al-Qaeda with significant new opportunities as a movement. It is now in a position to exploit the widespread disappointment and disillusion engendered by a series of "half and reversed" revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East. Jihadists are also benefiting from the battle for influence between the regional powers. Due in part to their intervention, several local conflicts have escalated into "proxy wars", with different countries supplying rival combatants with money and weapons.

Islamism revived

Just as jihadism in the Netherlands has undergone a transformation, so developments in both other parts of Europe and the Arab world have utterly changed its international context. The series of uprisings originally dubbed the Arab Spring looked at first like a victory for liberal forces. Very soon, however, the leading role was taken over by non-violent Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and various

Salafist movements, which suddenly found themselves in a position to articulate their political voice. Within just a few months the Muslim Brotherhood, in particular, succeeded in gaining full or partial control of a number of countries. That caused great concern in several of the Gulf states, which have long viewed that organisation as a threat to their ruling monarchies. In response, some of those states began supporting Salafist movements of various

kinds to act as a counterweight. But this did not stop certain Salafists forging alliances with the Brotherhood against what both saw as their common secular enemy.

Jihadism revived

The Arab uprisings did more than sweep away, or at least challenge, old dictatorships. Initially, they also surprised and disorientated the jihadist militant groups in the region. After a while, however, it became apparent that certain of their side-effects, although not instigated by the jihadists, were providing them with new impetus. Activists in various countries were freed from prison or able to escape. Others returned from exile. Old networks were revived and, with restrictions on freedom of expression relaxed, able to present their message to a wider audience. Conditions also provided fertile ground for the creation of new jihadist networks. Widespread dissatisfaction with the lack of economic progress following the uprisings, and the establishment of new regimes that seemed to have forgotten the Islamist agenda, fuelled popular rancour.

The rapidly worsening security situation in the countries concerned played into jihadist hands, too. With little or no policing, crime increased and weapons became widely available. The lawlessness in some regions allowed the arms trade to flourish. Since the old security apparatus in countries like Egypt and Libya had partially collapsed, new jihadist groups were able to form without hindrance.

In Yemen and Syria, where the uprisings evolved into internal conflict or outright civil war, militant jihadist forces appeared with many of the characteristics of a rebel army.

A new playing field for Al-Qaeda

In the early stage of the Arab uprisings, it was frequently affirmed that the relatively non-violent transitions of power had rendered Al-Qaeda irrelevant in North Africa and the Middle East. After all, Islamist movements would now be included in the political process. The comparatively peaceful nature of the transitions, it was claimed, had invalidated Al-Qaeda's basic argument, that violence is the only means to bring about change. Moreover, the movement was caught off guard by the speed of the uprisings' success. It therefore took some time before Al-Qaeda was able to formulate an answer to them. Eventually, however, they brought it new opportunities. Today, its operational base area is bigger than ever before and includes a number of appealing and accessible battlefronts for jihadists from Europe.

To better understand the role Al-Qaeda is playing now, in the wake of the transitions in North Africa and the Middle East, it is necessary to look at its current structure. This comprises the core movement and its so-called affiliates.

As of 2014, core Al-Qaeda is an organisation with a solid structure of senior leaders headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, plus a cadre,

members and sympathisers. Its top figures are currently based in Pakistan and Yemen and it has branches in several other countries, including Libya and Syria. Despite the setbacks it has suffered in recent years, such as the death of Osama bin Laden and the killing of many other senior leaders in US drone strikes, the core organisation has succeeded in adapting to its changed circumstances. It still has enough personnel with the combat experience, the contacts and the authority needed to play a leading role in jihadism. It still has functioning facilitation networks in the countries surrounding Syria, too, and these have recently expanded into Syria itself. They are dedicated to moving money, equipment and people.

Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda's affiliates are gaining in importance as well. Currently, they are Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP, based in Yemen), Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM, in Algeria), Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. As well as pursuing the international jihad, each of these groups has its own local or regional agenda – which it frequently prioritises. And they sometimes only nominally accept advice or instructions issued by core Al-Qaeda, which can cause tensions with the “parent” organisation.

New opportunities for Al-Qaeda: disappointment and disillusion

At first, the Arab uprisings appeared to have dealt a death blow to the Al-Qaeda doctrine that only violence brings about change.

Now, though, the movement is reaping the rewards of its early warning to beware of “half revolutions”. It has always urged the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East not to settle for partial change. The old regimes may have fallen, but in its view the new ones – which usually include remnants of the old – are puppets of the West. In a number of cases, the revolution even appears to have been reversed. Al-Qaeda was quick to anticipate that the initial euphoria would give way to disappointment and disillusion, and so stresses in its propaganda that the time has come to complete the change. Now by means of the jihad.

New opportunities for Al-Qaeda: exploiting regional power struggles

As well as exploiting post-revolutionary disillusion, Al-Qaeda has also benefited from the renewed struggle for influence between regional powers in the aftermath of the uprisings. With the disappearance or endangerment of several once-powerful regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, other leading players in the region have seized the opportunity to try to expand their own spheres of influence at the expense of their opponents. With that in mind, countries like Turkey, Qatar and Iran welcomed the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. But for Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, the new Brotherhood-dominated regimes posed two serious threats. First, the possibility that they might inspire and support opposition movements seeking to overthrow the Arab monarchies.

And second, their potential to form an “axis” with Iran.

Their overriding fear of increasing Iranian influence in the region was one of the main reasons why several of the Gulf states embroiled themselves in the conflict in Syria from an early stage. The fall of the regime led by President Assad, an ally of Iran, would eliminate an important “bridgehead” for that country. Certain Gulf states therefore began supplying armed opposition groups with money and weapons, often channelled through so-called charitable organisations with close links to their governments. They also encouraged influential Muslim scholars to declare the struggle in Syria a legitimate jihad. An important aspect of this effort, with repercussions as far afield as the Netherlands, was the inflammatory rhetoric used by leading preachers from the Gulf region from the early days of the conflict. That sought to frame the civil war as a sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shi’ites. For Iran, meanwhile, fear of losing its position in Syria was reason enough to intensify its support for the Assad regime and to persuade Hezbollah, its ally in Lebanon, to intervene directly.

As the civil war in Syria intensified and “jihadised” within a sectarian frame largely defined by foreign powers, all Al-Qaeda had to do was respond deftly to the resulting chaos. Regional power struggles in North Africa and the Middle East have thus helped to “release the genie from the bottle” for core Al-Qaeda, its affiliates and possibly also

some even more extreme splinter groups to exploit as they will. At the moment they are doing that mostly in Syria itself, but it is quite conceivable that the effect will spread to other theatres of conflict, such as Iraq and Yemen. These have the potential to become even fiercer battlegrounds in the struggle for power between Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states on one side and, on the other Iran and its allies. As Bahrain already is, to some extent.

Risks for Al-Qaeda: breakaway affiliates

There have been major tensions recently between core Al-Qaeda and the militant group the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, ISIL), which is active in both Iraq and Syria. For years, the senior leaders of the parent organisation have been trying to persuade this wayward affiliate to soften its zealously extreme anti-Shia ideology and activities, which evidently exceeded even what Al-Qaeda considers acceptable. Finally, in January 2014, core Al-Qaeda publicly distanced itself from ISIS and its activities. Despite that, ISIS has shown absolutely no willingness to compromise. A lasting split between the two organisations could eventually divide jihadism as a whole, pitting al-Zawahiri’s supporters against ISIS adherents. Such a situation would seriously undermine core Al-Qaeda’s position as the movement’s guiding force, and might even nullify all the opportunities for core Al-Qaeda described above.



6. The civil war in Syria

Summary

The civil war in Syria has acted as a catalyst, amplifying the effects of the developments described in previous chapters to produce an unexpectedly rapid, even explosive growth of jihadism in the Netherlands.

Syria's popularity as a destination for foreign fighters has a variety of causes, amongst them factors of a practical, a psychological and a religious nature. One of the most important is the country's geographical location, which makes it far easier to reach than other theatres of jihad, such as Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The conflict there also needs to be viewed in an ideological context: for many jihadists, Syria has a special meaning as one of the "heartlands" of Islam. Another key factor is the sectarian framing of the civil war as a battle between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Finally, there is its perceived potential as the cradle of the dreamed-for caliphate; some supporters of this ideal are known to have travelled with their wives to areas under jihadist control in the belief that they can already settle in the Islamic caliphate in the Levant.

From uprising to theatre of jihad

The civil war in Syria began in March 2011 as one of the Arab Spring uprisings, against the dictatorial regime headed by President Assad. His government was widely accused of nepotism, corruption and distributing wealth unfairly. The security services and the army brutally suppressed all peaceful calls for greater democracy, prompting more and more demonstrators to arm themselves. This marked the beginning of the Syrian opposition's long struggle against the regime, which slowly descended into outright civil war. Various countries provided different sections of the opposition with military and political support, whilst the regime was helped by its allies.

The struggle intensified at a rapid rate, with ever heavier weaponry being brought to bear.

As the conflict progressed, parts of the fragmented opposition began to take on an Islamist character. More and more factions of a radical bent appeared, stressing the religious rather than the democratic aspects of the uprising. Initially, many of these Salafist or jihadist insurgents were themselves Syrians. Very soon, however, the country also started to become an attractive destination for foreign fighters. The group Jabhat al-Nusra entered the fray in 2012, at first portraying itself as a radical Syrian force but later openly acting as the Syrian branch

of Al-Qaeda. In 2013 it was joined by the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), the branch originating in Iraq but now seeking to expand its activities throughout the region and known since April 2013 as ISIS (the extra S stands for “al-Sham”, meaning greater Syria or the Levant). Since June 2014 they call themselves IS (Islamic State).

Representatives of core Al-Qaeda are also active in Syria. And several other, smaller jihadist groups have joined the struggle, too.

Within eighteen months, Syria had evolved into a prominent theatre of jihad. Thousands of radical Muslims from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia have travelled out to join one or other of the jihadist groups active there. And they have been joined by hundreds of Europeans. These foreign fighters are trained inside the country and then sent into battle. Generally inexperienced and unskilled as combatants, many have been involved in war crimes and other atrocities. Others have been persuaded to carry out suicide attacks or have died in the fighting. And some have come into contact for the first time with individuals and networks seeking to pursue violent jihad outside Syria. All try to encourage friends and relatives to follow them to Syria.

A popular destination

Late in 2012, almost overnight Syria became the most popular destination ever for jihadists from the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. The large numbers travelling there show that this particular conflict has

significantly reduced the barriers to active participation in the struggle. Dozens of people who had never before tried to reach a jihadist battle zone did decide to join the fight in Syria. There are various reasons for this, amongst them factors of a practical, a psychological and a religious nature.

One of the most important is the country’s geographical location, which makes it far easier to reach than other theatres of jihad, such as Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia. The journey is cheap and requires little advance preparation. Dutch jihadists take low-cost flights from a number of different European airports to Istanbul, from where buses run directly to the Turkish-Syrian border region. For a long time the crossing into Syria itself was fairly straightforward, and even now it can be arranged quite easily with the assistance of fellow jihadists already in the area. The first successful arrivals of foreign fighters encouraged others to try to follow suit. Once there, they actively inspire and motivate friends and relatives still in the Netherlands to join them. Contacts between fighters in Syria and the “home front”, particularly through social media, emphasise that newcomers will find a warm welcome in the ranks. And some of those in the region now act as facilitators, assisting the new recruits with their journey.

Another appealing factor for jihadists is the active participation of certain prominent militant groups in the conflict. The presence in Syria of Jabhat al-Nusra, and

especially that of ISIS, which consists almost entirely of foreign fighters, draws in prospective fighters from all over the world. The often inexperienced Europeans amongst them view Syria as giving them the opportunity to fight alongside seasoned warriors, and these groups are only too happy to make use of the foreigners arriving in large numbers at the Syrian border for their own purposes. Most of the Dutch jihadists travelling there want to join either Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS and, since the first were recruited by these groups in the spring of 2013, most have succeeded in doing so.

Finally, the widespread belief that the struggle against the Syrian regime is a just cause has also helped to recruit jihadists from the Netherlands. Ever since the conflict began, the Dutch Muslim community has followed the plight of the Syrian people with great concern. Images of bloodshed on Arabic and Turkish satellite television channels have aroused outrage in Muslims across the Western world. As an Alawite, President Assad is viewed by many Sunnis, especially, as an apostate engaged in the systematic slaughter of innocent Muslims. The fact that Western governments have not come to the aid of the Syrian people by supplying the opposition with military equipment has only increased their resolve to do something themselves.

Ideological context

To understand why so many radical Muslims from the Netherlands and other parts of Europe are prepared to travel to Syria to

fight there, it is necessary to place the conflict in an ideological context. For many jihadists, the country has a special significance because it is named in early Islamic texts as the faith's "core region". It is part of the Levant region, which also contains Jerusalem, a city jihadists dream of "liberating" from arch-enemy Israel. They also view this war as one they could actually win, thus paving the way for another of their long-term goals: the establishment of an Islamic caliphate under Sharia law. That objective is a key motivating factor for most of the jihadists travelling to Syria, and those killed in the struggle are hailed as martyrs in the cause of the caliphate. With parts of the country now firmly under jihadist control, some of the incoming foreign fighters have brought their wives with them in the belief that they can already settle in that "pure" Islamic state and bring up their children as its first generation of inhabitants. Even a number of single women have made the journey. ISIS propaganda exploits this idealised perception of a caliphate in the making, with images posted online of its fighters repairing roads, opening schools and setting up courts.

Framing as a Sunni-Shia conflict

Yet another important factor in the sharp rise in the number of foreign jihadists attracted to Syria is the clear Sunni-Shia divide in the conflict there. In a country with a patchwork of religious communities, even in its early stage the civil war acquired a sectarian undertone. And that has only become more and more prominent since.

President Assad is an Alawite, and thus a member of a religious minority which has held the reins of power in Syria since 1970. Their faith is generally regarded as a sub-branch of Shia Islam, but less dogmatic than its mainstream. The Assad regime, with strong secular and socialist traits, has faced considerable opposition from sections of the Sunni population, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, ever since it was established. Brutal suppression of such challenges in the 1980s helped to sow the seeds of the current civil war.

Popular anti-Shia sentiment is fanned by some important religious leaders. In particular, it has been encouraged by influential dawah Salafist clerics in certain Gulf states. Since the beginning of the conflict, they have used the internet, social media and satellite television to disseminate inflammatory calls to battle. In the process they have often distanced themselves from jihadist groups and stated their opposition to the killing of civilians on grounds of faith or ethnicity, and also condemned “takfir”, the practice of declaring fellow Muslims infidels. But this does not detract from the fact that they have been extremely outspoken in urging their supporters to join the fight against the Shi’ites. Consequently, these clerics have contributed significantly to the Salafist framing of the civil war in Syria as an ultimate battle between Sunnis and Shi’ites.

Jihadist groups fighting in Syria are happy to exploit anti-Shia feelings to justify their “holy war” in the Levant. ISIS leads the way in this respect, having previously directed much of its violent activity in Iraq explicitly against the Shi’ite community, which holds power there. In that it differs from Al-Qaeda, which would prefer that the jihad not descend into internecine warfare between Muslims. ISIS brought its anti-Shia zealotry with it to Syria when it joined the civil war in 2013. Now that it has parted ways with Al-Qaeda, this sectarian aspect of its campaign has become more prominent than ever before.



7. New risks to the Netherlands

Summary

Jihadism's new dynamic poses risks to the Netherlands. In the short and medium term these include the danger of terrorist attacks against our country, or others in Europe, planned by networks currently active in Syria but with a global agenda. They might specifically "task" European jihadists to strike in their home countries. Alternatively, fighters returning from jihad could instigate terrorist violence of their own accord, impelled by hatred or trauma. Potential targets range from the Dutch government and society in general to specific sections of the population, such as Jews, Shi'ite Muslims or Muslim opponents of jihadism.

As well as the terrorist threat, there are also risks associated with radicalisation in broader terms. This could increase support for the intolerant and antidemocratic extremist ideas which typify jihadism, thus possibly fuelling the polarisation of different sections of the Dutch population.

In the previous chapters we have described how, in the space of just a few years, jihadism in the Netherlands has undergone a drastic transformation and emerged far more dynamic than before. New groups paved the way for these changes from 2010 onwards, through openly provocative activities and extensive use of social media. Combined with the developments in Dutch Salafism and the effects of the Arab uprisings, this renewed activism would probably have revived jihadism in our country. However, the movement would not have grown to its present extent without the massive impetus provided by Syria as a new theatre of jihad.

This new dynamic poses risks to the Netherlands in both the short and the medium term. Some of these arise directly out of the exodus of jihadists to join the struggle in Syria, and the expected return of some of those fighters. Others are associated with the jihadist movement's growth on Dutch soil itself. And they are not confined to the threat of terrorist violence in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe and to increased readiness to participate in the jihad in other conflict zones around the world, real though both are. There are also risks associated with radicalisation in broader terms, such as enhanced support for the intolerant and antidemocratic ideas which typify jihadism possibly causing greater polarisation of different sections of the Dutch population.

Terrorist risks

The involvement of European jihadists in the conflict in Syria increases the risk of terrorist attacks directed by Al-Qaeda against the Netherlands and other European countries. The European fighters in Syria are currently being absorbed into terrorist networks with a global agenda. The struggle against the West forms an important part of this agenda. The question is whether, and to what extent, these combatants (those with European passports) are going to be systematically “tasked” to strike in their home countries upon their return. At present, the jihadist groups active in Syria are preoccupied with events there. But it is quite conceivable that attacks against the West are already being planned from Syria. Moreover, it seems highly likely that the contacts Dutch and other European jihadists are making there could be exploited by internationally active networks to organise acts of terrorism in Europe.

In the medium term, fighters returning from Syria could form core groups out of which emerge new professional jihadist networks in Europe. Potential activities range from facilitating, financing and arranging future travel to conflict zones to planning and carrying out terrorist attacks. A specific illustration of this potential is provided by the young Dutch fighters at present serving with Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS. Quite apart from the fact that they are receiving military training and gaining combat experience, they are now also in direct contact with seasoned supporters of

the international jihad. Many of the current generation of jihadist leaders are veterans of earlier conflicts, such as Chechnya and Afghanistan. The young foreign fighters in Syria are the veterans of the future, and potentially also the movement’s next generation of leaders in Europe.

But, whether or not directed by Al-Qaeda to attack the West, they are not the only risk. Non-European fighters now in Syria might also come to Europe to play a role comparable with that of their forerunners in the 1990s, veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Bosnia. Many of these individuals became important links in European jihadist networks, very often holding controlling positions. We cannot exactly compare the two situations, though. Europe now has a far stricter immigration policy, making it more difficult for the jihadists of today to settle in our region than it was for their predecessors. Nonetheless, their illegal penetration of Europe’s outer borders cannot be ruled out.

Even returning fighters not under direct instructions from global terrorist networks to attack the West can still pose a threat in the short and medium term. They have, after all, spent time in a violent environment and may well have been involved in atrocities. Such experiences can result in trauma and, whether or not coupled with further radicalisation, engender a tendency towards extreme violence – either criminal or terrorist in nature.

Moreover, the risk does not emanate only from those who have actually been in Syria. The jihad there also has the potential to further radicalise supporters and sympathisers at home in the Netherlands. Social media are used to circulate images and stories of “heroic” Dutch jihadist fighters, sometimes glorifying their combat experiences, involvement in atrocities and martyrdom for the cause. Such material could easily contribute towards a wider acceptance of the use of violence, even in the Netherlands. And perhaps inspire certain individuals actually to adopt it. As well as acts of terrorism directed against the Dutch government or society in general, there is also a danger that specific groups might be targeted: Jews, Shi’ites or Muslims the jihadists regard as apostates because they do not share their extremist interpretation of Islam.

The propaganda generated by the conflict in Syria is fuelling the growth of an assertive Dutch jihadism. Whilst this movement is certainly strongly anti-Western, at present Syria remains the principal focus of its rhetoric and activities. Under certain circumstances, however, it is quite conceivable that the jihadist movement could turn to violence against Dutch society. For instance, if real or perceived public hostility towards Islam grows or if the Netherlands becomes more involved in military conflicts in Muslim nations.

Other theatres of jihad

As just stated, Syria is currently the main focus of the Dutch jihadist movement. But it is quite possible that it could shift its attention to other theatres of jihad in the future. These might be existing conflict zones, such as Yemen and Iraq, or new ones like Egypt (including Sinai) and Libya. Interest in joining the jihad in these regions will depend very much upon the movement’s strength and self-confidence if and when they become jihadist rallying points.

Broader risks

As well as increasing the threat of terrorist violence in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, not to mention creating a greater readiness to join jihadist struggles in other parts of the world, the presence of Dutch jihadist fighters in Syria and the movement’s growth in their homeland are also intensifying the broader short and medium-term risks associated with ideological radicalisation. Already, reports of jihadists’ supposed progress in Syria in establishing an Islamic caliphate under Sharia law are having a visible effect in the Netherlands, in that they are further radicalising backers of that ultimate goal. Emanating primarily from groups like ISIS, such stories convince supporters and sympathisers that the caliphate is not some utopian dream but an achievable reality for Syria and other Muslim nations – and even for the Netherlands.

This can strengthen jihadists here in their belief that they must reject the democratic legal order, that “pure” Muslims are subject only to the Sharia and that they are not bound by secular Dutch law and values. Indirectly, then, the conflict in Syria is shaping Dutch jihadism’s domestic political and ideological agenda. In particular, it is not only broadening support within the movement for intolerant and antidemocratic ideas but also encouraging efforts to put them into practice. The parallel developments within Salafism in the Netherlands, as described in Chapter 4, may well be reinforcing this process. Even now, Dutch Muslims who openly oppose participation in the war in Syria and the highly intolerant and antidemocratic ideology propounded by jihadism are finding themselves increasingly subject to physical and online intimidation.

The broader radicalisation-related risk requiring a response in the short to medium term thus centres on greater support in the Netherlands for the intolerant and antidemocratic ideas which typify jihadism. And, arising out of them, the danger of increased polarisation of different sections of the Dutch population.



8. Resilience

Summary

Jihadism's current dynamic in the Netherlands and surrounding countries, largely a result of the conflict in Syria, must be resisted in order to counter radicalisation and prevent terrorism. This requires government measures, but also greater resilience amongst communities susceptible to the jihadist message. Past experience is only helpful to a limited extent, since the movement now manifests itself in a different way.

New risks, enough resilience?

As previous chapters have made clear, jihadism is currently growing rapidly in the Netherlands due to a combination of factors. Chapter 7 described the resulting risks, in both the short and the longer term. How serious they are is determined in part by the severity of the threat emanating from jihadism itself, and in part by our ability to resist it. There are two components to that resistance. One is the measures taken by government to counter jihadism in all its manifestations, the other the degree of resilience shown by society as a whole and, especially, by those communities susceptible to radicalisation.

Developing resilience

Following the attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the 2004 Madrid bombings and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, also in 2004, the Dutch authorities developed what they called “the broad approach” to counterterrorism. Underlying this is the

idea that it is not only terrorism itself that has to be addressed, but also the processes of radicalisation which pave the way for it.

During the first decade of this century, the broad approach combined a variety of preventive measures – as described in the national Action Plan on Polarisation and Radicalisation for 2007-2011 (*Actieplan Polarisatie and Radicalisatie 2007-2011*) – with the criminal prosecution of terrorism suspects, intelligence activities and the use of immigration law against certain undesirable individuals from overseas. By the end of the decade, this strategy seemed to have been effective. From 2005 onwards, the established jihadist networks in the Netherlands were severely weakened and radicalisation ceased to be a widespread phenomenon.

Since 2010, however, neither these past official efforts nor the determination on the part of Muslim communities to resist extremism and terrorism have been enough

to check a new wave of radicalisation and jihadist recruitment in the Netherlands. There are a number of reasons for this.

Less government action

Under the Action Plan on Polarisation and Radicalisation, substantial investment went into training front-line professionals (community police officers, youth workers, social workers and so on) to recognise signs of radicalisation. When the plan period ended in 2011, however, so too did the funding for these projects. Moreover, political interest in radicalisation waned at both the national and local levels. This was due in part to the official threat level from terrorism stabilising at “moderate” for a period of several years, from 2009 to 2013. That resulted in expertise and capacity being diverted elsewhere.

The tools designed specifically to increase knowledge and awareness of radicalisation amongst front-line professionals and other relevant personnel had not yet been developed to a stage at which they addressed the phenomenon in all its complexity. That applied especially to the “early warning” tools based upon profiles and indicators of radicalisation. In reality, it is often impossible to tell what route will lead a person to active participation in the jihadist movement. Individuals can fall prey to radicalisation for any number of reasons. They may have had traumatic experiences in the past, psychological problems, a history of criminality or a sense that their position in mainstream society was hopeless. But

there are also jihadists, including fighters abroad, with none of this “baggage”. Some have good qualifications and prospects, but turn to the jihad out of moral outrage, political engagement or religious piety. Others are driven by peer pressure or a thirst for adventure. The tools focusing upon profiles and indicators are thus of limited use.

A broad-based policy of prevention, with such factors as social integration and cohesion playing a prominent role, can only ever deliver effective results in the longer term. Because of this distant horizon, as of 2010 or so the initiatives set in motion during the preceding years had not reached the point where they were in a position to help stem the new wave of radicalisation.

All legal efforts to check radicalisation, whether through civil or criminal procedures, are bound by the constraints imposed by constitutional order and by the legislation currently on the statute book. Legal successes have included the conviction of the leader of Sharia4Holland for threatening a famous politician and, in November 2013, judgments against two aspiring jihadists. Despite this, in recent years organisations like Behind Bars/Street Dawah and individual jihadists have deliberately pushed at the boundaries of what is permissible under Dutch law. Moreover, the jihadist movement’s increased professionalism – its ability to enable fighters travelling to conflict zones to evade the authorities, for example – has

made it harder for the government to intervene effectively.

Less community resilience

Just as the government's ability to resist greater radicalisation has been reduced, so too has resilience on the part of society in general and within the Dutch Muslim communities in particular.

For society as a whole, this is due in part to greater polarisation around the theme of Islam in the Netherlands. Public discussion of this topic regularly attracts abusive contributions, and on more than one occasion has led to physical or online intimidation and threats directed at participants. The resulting divisiveness could also be undermining resilience to radicalisation within Muslim communities, since it may appear to legitimise the extremists and uphold arguments against moderation.

That reduced resilience is also related to the developments within dawah Salafism discussed earlier in this report. Whilst this movement may once have bolstered resistance to jihadism amongst Muslims in the Netherlands, today it looks more and more like a potential nursery for the process of radicalisation undergone by many jihadists.

The AIVD's contribution

The transformation of the Dutch jihadist movement – that is, its professionalisation, its far-reaching decentralisation and its

adoption of social media to provide mutual influence and guidance – demands that Dutch society constantly reassess its resilience to this form of extremism and its ability to deal with the risks it poses. The AIVD will therefore continue to monitor developments in this area as a priority and to supply those responsible for making and implementing policy with relevant information.

9. Conclusion and a look ahead

As a result of developments in the Netherlands and the conflict in Syria, in recent years Dutch jihadism has become far more extensive and unpredictable a phenomenon than ever before. And the same applies to the threat it poses in the short and medium term.

The movement's current dynamic is a product not only of external circumstances (events in the Arab world, especially Syria) but also of a fundamental internal transformation. It is now largely decentralised and horizontal, with relatively little place for authority. There are some "choreographers" in the background, in the form of influential individuals, Facebook pages and websites dedicated to disseminating the jihadist message. But the great "mass" of Dutch adherents are self-driven, their activism sustained by constant mutual, peer-to-peer influence. Social media play a key role in this process. The movement is thus characterised by its collective decentralised "self-guidance", with only limited guidance from above.

Salafism's role in relation to radicalisation has also changed over the past few years. Not only have the differences between dawah Salafism and jihadism blurred, but the former has become a more prominent feature in the landscape of Dutch Islam, both physically and online. As jihadists and Salafists regularly visit the same places, it

can be hard for an outside observer to tell between them. Younger, more radical preachers are drawing potential jihadist sympathisers away from the influence of the established dawah Salafist organisations, which is one reason why their ability to counter such extremist tendencies has diminished.

For the time being, it appears that the jihadist groups fighting in Syria are concentrating upon the overthrow of President Assad and prevailing over rival opposition forces so that they can establish an Islamic caliphate in the region. However, this focus upon the "near enemy" (in the Middle East) could easily give way to open hostility towards the "far enemy" (the West) – especially if the West itself becomes obviously more interested in countering jihadist influence than in removing the Assad regime. Meanwhile, there remains a real and quite imminent risk of terrorist attacks in Europe. These could either be carried out by radicalised returnees from Syria on their own initiative or instigated by Al-Qaeda operatives who see the conflict as a fertile recruiting ground for European participants in their global jihad. To a great extent, then, the nature and extent of the threat facing the Netherlands are dependent upon developments in North Africa and the Middle East in general, and Syria in particular, and so largely beyond the reach of our country's influence.

Domestically, a new approach needs to be found to increase our national resilience to jihadism. Whether preventive or repressive, any measures put in place should reflect the changed structure and character of the Dutch jihadist movement. And they should be comprehensive in nature, developed and implemented jointly and coherently by all the relevant public-sector stakeholders. Effective international co-operation is also essential. The AIVD continues to make every effort to support its partners in government in shaping this new approach.

The Dutch government, the Muslim communities in the Netherlands and the nation as a whole together face the challenge of devising a new response capable of adequately countering the jihadist movement in this country, so that it is prevented from posing an ever greater threat to our democratic legal order, our national security and our society.



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