

Letter of 13 March 2013 from the Minister of Security and Justice to the House of Representatives of the States General containing a summary of the March, 2013 edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN32).

Threat level

Recent DTNs have reported a number of alarming developments that affect the threat level. The plausibility of an attack targeting the Netherlands or Dutch interests abroad has increased in recent months to such an extent that the threat level has been raised to 'substantial'. This means that there is a realistic possibility that an attack will take place in the Netherlands.

Three developments give particular cause for concern. First, there has been a significant increase in the number of jihadists travelling to countries in Africa and the Middle East, especially Syria. Many western countries have serious concerns about jihadtravellers and returnees. This includes dozens of people from the Netherlands and hundreds from Europe as a whole, many of whom are joining local combatants. The sheer number of people involved is making it difficult for intelligence and security services to keep an eye on them. The unknown threat – as posed by persons or groups off these services' radar – has therefore increased. The phenomenon of travelling abroad to participate in jihad is an important factor in the terrorist threat assessment. Those going to other countries may harm Western interests in the areas in which they operate. And they can gain expertise and combat experience. Jihadists who reach their destination could encourage sympathisers in their country of residence to join them and may help them to do so. Moreover, when they return home they could use their ideological zeal and combat experience to inspire others to become radicalised and wage jihad abroad. They could also mount an attack in the Netherlands, either on their own initiative or on behalf of the jihadist group they have joined. While not all returning jihadists pose a threat, a few could arrive home highly radicalised, traumatised and with a strong will to commit violence.

Second, there are signs of a rise in Islamist radicalisation of small groups of young people in the Netherlands. One indicator for this is the growing number of people travelling abroad to participate in jihad. There are also indications that jihadists can very rapidly become radicalised to the point of embracing violence. With this in mind, the fact that politicians, the authorities and the public have been paying less attention to radicalisation in recent years gives cause for concern.

Third, there have been alarming developments in various parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Several countries are going through a complex transition towards democracy following the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010. The downside of this process is that jihadist organisations in these countries are now able to operate. The once highly repressive security apparatuses are no longer willing or able to combat these organisations. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether more moderate forces have the political will or power to resist the rise of the jihadist movement. Egypt, for example, is becoming a country where jihadists can increase their capabilities without much interference. Jihadists from Western Europe have joined them in their fight against the Mursi regime and against Israel. They have also set their sights on Westerners and Western objects. While France's intervention in Mali – supported by many other countries including the Netherlands – has resulted in the recapture of territory from the jihadists in Northern Mali, it has also drawn more attention among the movement's members to French and other European targets. Jihadist networks in North Africa and the Middle East could also have their sights set on targets in Western Europe.

The Netherlands remains a legitimate target in the eyes of jihadists. It is seen as a country where Muslims suffer discrimination and where their faith is regularly insulted. The Netherlands is also considered to be one of the 'crusaders against Islam' because of its military activity – together with other western countries - in countries with a Muslim majority.

International context

There are unconfirmed reports that the Al Qa'ida core's leaders are planning to flee the border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where the organisation's activities are being seriously hampered by drone strikes and other military action. Now, more than two years since the Arab uprisings began, the situation in several of these countries is enabling jihadist groups to operate in the open and develop their organisations. In some countries, organisations are emerging that adhere to Al Qa'ida's ideology but that primarily work in social and political spheres.

International context of the jihadist threat: Africa and Asia

The threat assessment has been negatively influenced by developments in various parts of North Africa and the Middle East where jihadist groups have gained a foothold. The trend in three countries in particular gives cause for concern. In *Syria*, where a civil war continues to rage, various armed jihadist groups are uniting to form a Mujahideen Shura Council. The country is still attracting jihadist fighters from abroad, including the Netherlands.

In *Mali*, French troops intervened – with limited logistical support from countries including the Netherlands – against jihadist rebels who had established a free state in northern Mali. The intervention was successful, but as a consequence, the interests of France and the countries that supported its military intervention are now attracting more attention from Al Qa’ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and other armed jihadist groups. The French have raised their threat level. A hostage-taking at a gas plant in Algeria prompted a swift counterattack by Algerian troops, during which dozens of hostages, some of whom were from Western Europe and North America, were killed. Preparations for seizing the plant were already made before the French intervened in Mali, but the militants claimed they were acting in retaliation for France’s actions. In late January, there was an acute threat to Westerners in the Libyan city of Benghazi, also linked to the developments in Mali. The UK, Canada, the Netherlands and Germany called on their nationals to leave Benghazi immediately.

In *Egypt*, a large jihadist network with branches elsewhere in the region is evolving. It involves a number of European jihadists, including 20 Germans linked to the Millatu Ibrahim movement. The network is growing almost unhindered because Egypt’s security services have become less effective and because President Mursi’s government lacks the political will to intervene. While the network’s main aims are to undermine the Egyptian government and launch direct attacks on Israel, it also considers the Western presence in Egypt a legitimate target. The network aspires to eventually train fighters to attack targets in Western Europe.

In relation to the threat assessment, there is little positive to report from other countries where jihadists are active. The direct threat to the West from jihadist groups operating in *Pakistan* seems to have dwindled even further. At the same time, with the parliamentary elections coming up, the country’s political situation remains very volatile, something extremists could capitalise on. In *Yemen*, while the jihadists of Al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) lost control of parts of southern Yemen in the course of 2012, they continue to have an impact on the security situation in various ways, including a murder campaign targeting government officials. In *Somalia*, Al Shabaab is under intense military pressure. There are indications that the country is becoming less attractive to foreign jihadists. In *Indonesia*, the fragmented jihadist groups are proving difficult to combat. It has recently been confirmed that they once again want to train their sights on Western targets.

International threat: Europe

Various incidents occurred in Europe in the period under review. In November 2012, a small terrorist cell led by 45-year-old chemist Brunon Kwiecień was dismantled in Poland. He had

reached an advanced stage in his plans to bomb the Polish parliament. Kwiecień, whom the media were quick to dub the 'Polish Breivik', was often critical of his country's government, which he blamed for the poor economic situation, though his exact motives are as yet unclear. He also gave lectures about making explosives.

On 10 December 2012, a suspected attack at Bonn's central railway station proved unsuccessful when a bag containing explosives failed to detonate, possibly due to a deliberate error in the bomb's construction. The perpetrators and their motives remain a mystery, but the authorities suspect the attempted bombing is linked to Islamists.

On 10 January 2013, three PKK activists, including co-founder Sakine Cansız, were found murdered in Paris. Two suspects of Kurdish descent were arrested. Much remains unclear about the background of the attacks. Turks and Kurds accused each other of the killings, heightening tensions between the two communities. On 5 February 2013, there was a failed attack in Denmark on the controversial critic of Islam Lars Hedegaard. His assailant got away, his motive unknown.

Threat to the Netherlands

Since late 2012, there has been a sharp rise in the number of jihadists going to join the cause abroad. Dozens of people from the Netherlands have travelled to countries such as Egypt and Syria, either independently or in small groups. Never before has so much travel to jihadist conflict zones been observed in such a short period of time. In the past year, hundreds of people have departed Europe to join armed jihadist groups abroad. These jihadists pose a possible threat to Western interests in the areas where they are active. Furthermore, those who reach their destination could encourage others to follow. On their return, they could use their combat experience and street credibility to influence young people susceptible to radicalisation. They could also set their sights on targets in the Netherlands. The sheer number of people involved is making it difficult for intelligence and security services to keep an eye on those leaving to take part in jihad and those returning. This increases the unknown threat, i.e. the threat posed by persons or groups off these services' radar.

In the eyes of international jihadists, the Netherlands remains a country that is hostile to Islam. With varying intensity, both mainstream Arab-language media and jihadist websites have been reporting on allegedly discriminatory or denigrating statements and acts against Muslims in the Netherlands. These reports have continued over the past few months. For example, in November 2012, Sheikh Fu'ad Shongole, a Somali Al Shabaab leader,

mentioned the Netherlands as an example of a Western country hostile to Islam. And in January 2013, PVV leader Geert Wilders attracted negative attention in Arab-language media when he expressed his intention to put Islam on the top of the political agenda again. March 1st 2013 the tenth edition of the jihadist internetmagazin in English 'Inspire' was published. Included was a hitlist with the names of Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

The Dutch presence in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries also makes the Netherlands a legitimate target in the eyes of jihadists' sights as a legitimate target. This is expected to remain the case for the foreseeable future, partly due to the logistical support being given to France's intervention in Mali.

Violent radicalisation and polarisation

Tensions between Turks and Kurds rose in early 2013 following the resumption of peace talks in Turkey and the murder of three Kurdish activists. In December 2012, 55 people attending an international PKK gathering were arrested in Ellemeet in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Nine of them were detained a long period of time.

Members of Dutch Islamist groups appear to be sharpening their focus on jihad in Muslim countries. While groups like Sharia4Holland and Behind Bars have shown little in the way of overt activity in the Netherlands in recent months, some of their members have been linked to jihad abroad.

Various activist and extremist groups in the Netherlands attracted attention in the period under review. Animal rights extremists committed a number of unlawful acts, such as damaging hunting shelters and vandalising or daubing slogans on buildings occupied by pharmaceutical companies. Left-wing and asylum rights extremists were active too, including at the tented camps for failed asylum seekers in Amsterdam and The Hague at the end of 2012. The training centre run by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) was attacked with paint bombs. On 22 January 2013, the well-known activist Joke Kaviaar, a key figure in the asylum rights movement, was sentenced to four months in prison for incitement. There was little activity among right-wing extremists. Only 25 people took part in the demonstration by the Nederlandse Volks-Unie against child rapists and paedophiles on 10 November 2012. Ultra-nationalist groups like Voorpost were also relatively inactive. This lack of activity is in stark contrast to the situation in Germany, where preliminary investigations are under way against three Nazi terrorist associations, and the threat from right-wing extremists has assumed a prominent place on the political agenda.

Resistance

Despite signs of growing radicalism, the Dutch public is generally resistant to extremism and violence committed on ideological grounds. Extremist groups operate on a very small scale. As far as it is known, there have been few, if any, violent incidents fuelled by ideological factors.

Preventing people from waging jihad abroad difficult

Preventing people from travelling abroad to participate in jihad is often a difficult task. Lack of sufficient evidence often makes criminal prosecution impossible. An exception to this was the arrest on 29 November 2012 of three men – two of Turkish and one of Iraqi origin – suspected of planning to travel to Syria for jihadist purposes. Home searches produced evidence that included knives, a sword, a crossbow, farewell letters, packed rucksacks and jihadist texts. Another factor that makes it difficult to prevent an imminent departure to a jihadist conflict zone is a lack of crucial information, such as the date of travel or the destination, even if the intelligence and security services are aware of a person's intentions. Moreover, jihadists who plan to travel abroad often have a high security awareness, which can thwart effective intervention. The growing number of jihadists departing the country and the limited scope for preventing them from doing so has also had a negative impact on the threat assessment.

Risks associated with diminished preventive action against extremists

Research shows that efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism have followed a similar trend in several European countries.¹ In the UK, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, programmes now have a narrower scope than they did in the past. They no longer deal with entire population groups, but instead focus narrowly on intervention in the case of radicalised individuals. The main reasons for this change are doubts as to the effectiveness of broad-based prevention programmes, a more limited manifestation of radicalism, and cutbacks due to the economic crisis. In the Netherlands, too, broad-based prevention under the Action Plan on Polarisation and Radicalisation, 2007-2011 has made way for a more specific approach focusing on providing knowledge and expertise to support the areas and sectors facing the highest risk of violent radicalisation. This approach is more in line with the political and financial reality, but from a threat perspective it is not without risk. It is conceivable that local alertness to extremism will decline, as will the expertise needed to recognise

¹ L. Vidino and J. Brandon, 'Countering Radicalization in Europe', ICSR 2012.

radicalisation, as less training is being provided. This is an alarming trend given the rise in radicalisation of small groups of young people and the pace at which this is occurring.