

## **Letter from the Minister of Security and Justice to the House of Representatives of the States General containing a summary of the 33rd edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN33)**

### **Threat level**

The threat level for the Netherlands remains 'substantial', which means the chance of an attack is real. The most salient potential threat to the Netherlands is the potential return of jihadists who have left to fight in Syria. As of early June, a total of between 50 and 100 people had set out for Syria. Although not every person to return from a jihadist conflict zone poses a threat, it should be remembered that these people are not only coming back with radical ideas; they are also traumatised and fully prepared to use violence. Prospective jihadist travellers that have been stopped before departing can also pose a threat. Some of these Western jihadists subsequently became involved in domestic conspiracies. The situation in Mali can also impact on Dutch interests. Dutch support for France can raise this country's profile as a target. In addition, the international threat in hotspots like Afghanistan, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen can have ramifications for the Netherlands over the long term. Along with that, there is the ongoing threat to the West generally. Various incidents illustrate the risks associated with simple, small-scale attacks carried out by individuals or a small group. This phenomenon has been in evidence for several years.

In the face of risks associated with jihadist travel from the Netherlands to Syria, the Dutch public in general remain resilient to extremism and ideological violence. Initiatives have been taken by various Muslim communities to combat jihadist travel to Syria. Finally, there is a growing focus in Dutch society on issues related to radicalisation and terrorism. This has led to increased vigilance to the risks of terrorism and extremism.

### **International context**

The political vacuum created in the wake of the Arab Spring continues to be exploited by jihadists. This represents the flip side of democratisation. In Egypt the political, economic and security situation has visibly deteriorated, and the security situation in the northern Sinai, near the Israeli border, remains worrisome.

In Tunisia, Salafist/jihadist groups are one of the major challenges to the democratic transition, stability and security. The largest movement of this kind, Ansar Sharia, has taken a more uncompromising stance, opting for open confrontation with the authorities. There are also concerns about the threat posed by the return of between 800 and 5,000 Tunisians from the conflict in Syria.

Another negative outcome of the changes sparked by the Arab Spring is the situation of religious minorities. Differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites are being magnified, with Shi'ites in particular falling victim to rising extremism and political Salafism in the region. The ongoing conflict in Syria has had a major influence on this trend. The further accentuation of differences between Sunnis and Shi'ites in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia may also affect relations between these religious denominations outside these parts of the world.

### **International threat: Africa and Asia**

The situation in Syria is the main international threat with potential ramifications for the Netherlands. For months, the Syrian Army and the armed opposition (led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), with the support of various jihadist networks) have been locked in a stalemate, each side holding the other in a deadly balance, with many atrocities and victims on both sides. The conflict has long since ceased to be between the regime and the opposition alone; it is increasingly assuming a more sharply defined sectarian and religious character. This is happening not only in Syria, but elsewhere as well.

What is relevant to the threat situation in the Netherlands is Syria's power of attraction for radicalised young people and the involvement of jihadist networks there. The latter are fighting to establish a caliphate, which only makes the situation in the country more complex. As a result, Syria could become a base for jihadist operations, as Afghanistan used to be. For the time being, jihadists make up only a fraction of the total opposition movement, and ideological and political differences among the jihadists prevent the formation of any clear, shared vision on the future of Syria.

Another prominent threat with potential implications for the Netherlands is the situation in Mali. In January 2013 the French, Chadian and Malian armies launched ground and air operations to retake northern Mali from the jihadists, who had created an autonomous jihadist state there. Mali's neighbours still fear that after heavy fighting, the jihadists will retreat over the border into Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mauritania and Niger. For now, there are no indications that a large-scale movement of Western jihadists is under way to northern Mali. Dutch support (logistical and otherwise) for France could raise the Netherlands' profile as a target.

Other hotspots that can have repercussions for the situation here are Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia and Yemen. In Yemen, the threat posed by Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has not changed significantly in recent months. Despite various military setbacks,

the group continues to exert a negative influence on the security situation in Yemen. The ongoing violence clearly shows that AQAP has not yet been defeated. In Somalia, al Shabaab has lost ground as a result of increased military pressure; yet it would be a mistake to write them off completely. In the last few months, Western nationals have run a growing risk of being abducted in certain parts of Nigeria. Ansar al-Muslimeen (Ansaru) is primarily responsible for this development. This group, which was founded in February 2012, is an offshoot of Boko Haram, the other jihadist group in Nigeria. In Afghanistan large sections of the Taliban and other groups continue to fight NATO and local authorities, as a result of the current political impasse there. Although certain segments of the Taliban are open to negotiations, it seems like the country will still be embroiled in conflict at the time of the political and military transition in 2014, thus increasing the chance of a civil war.

### **International threat: North America and Europe**

The attack on the Boston marathon of 15 April, which killed three and injured nearly 200, has had a profound effect on perceptions of risk in the West. The presumed perpetrators are thought to have made their bombs with the help of instructions from AQAP's propaganda magazine *Inspire*.

The facts of the case as they are currently understood do not rule out a brand of home-grown terrorism, possibly coloured by the complex relationship between the two brothers involved. There are no indications that the brothers were being controlled by parties from the Caucasus; indeed, groups there have denied involvement. Although the attack has no immediate consequences for the threat situation in the Netherlands, it will certainly have some impact. The marathon bombing illustrates the vulnerability of major events (soft targets). A certain associative fear can persist over time. With Boston fresh in the public mind, and the events of Queen's Day 2009 and Remembrance Day 2010 etched in its memory, panic and unrest can break out more easily at major public events, with all the attendant security risks. It is also worth noting that the murder of a soldier in London and the jihadist-inspired stabbing in Paris also appear to be small-scale or even individual acts. This is in keeping with jihadists' increasing focus on small-scale and simple attacks, carried out by individuals or small groups. This phenomenon has been in evidence for several years. The thinking behind small-scale attacks is that they are easier to carry out and that the likelihood of detection by the authorities is less.

After the French intervention in Mali, AQIM's threats against France have only become more frequent. Thus far, these threats have not led to a terrorist incident on French soil. By contrast, the terrorist threat to French targets abroad, principally in North and West Africa,

has increased, and the French intervention is one of the causes underlying the heightened risk of kidnapping for Westerners in parts of Africa. Although the Netherlands has not been specifically threatened by AQIM, the ongoing stream of threats can also have an impact on this country.

In the realm of non-jihadist terrorism, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish government have made gradual progress in their peace talks over the past few months. A truce observed by the PKK was followed by the withdrawal of armed Kurdish units from Turkish territory. Despite these developments, the process is still fragile and capable of being derailed by a relatively minor incident.

### **Threat to the Netherlands**

The threat posed by jihadist travellers who leave the Netherlands to fight in Syria (and by their potential return) remains one of the main elements of the current threat assessment. Although not every person to return from a jihadist conflict zone poses a threat, it should be remembered that these people are not only coming back with radical ideas; they are also traumatised and fully prepared to use violence. It is important to consider that prospective jihadist travellers that have been stopped before departing can also pose a threat. Some Western jihadists have become involved in domestic conspiracies after being prevented from reaching their destination abroad. With a total of 50 to 100 jihadists having set out for Syria as of early June, it would appear that growth has stagnated. On the basis of the available intelligence, it is reasonable to conclude that the Netherlands does not differ in this respect from comparable Western countries.

### **Violent radicalisation and polarisation**

The Netherlands takes a broad view of counterterrorism. A focus on radicalisation is integral to the Dutch approach, because in the most extreme cases radicalisation can lead to terrorist violence. Polarisation processes are important in this regard because of their potentially strong influence on radicalisation processes. With regard to Islamic radicalism in the Netherlands, groups like Sharia4Holland (S4H), Behind Bars, Hizb ut-Tahrir and Millatu Ibrahim (MI, 'the faith of Abraham') mainly seem focused on developments in Syria. MI is a radical, jihadist-oriented organisation that operates in a number of countries, but which does not appear to be centrally controlled. The German branch of IM was banned in 2012. In Germany the fear of an escalation between the far right and Salafists remains an ongoing concern.

Another salient social trend is the opposition of extreme left-wing groups and individuals to asylum policy in the Netherlands. The extremist segment of the asylum rights movements seems to be hardening its position. This more uncompromising position is paralleled by a growing critical focus, in the press and the political debate, on Dutch asylum policy.

### **Resistance**

Despite concerns about the risks associated with jihadist travel to Syria from the Netherlands, the Dutch public is generally resistant to extremism and ideological violence. Initiatives are being put forward by various Muslim communities denouncing jihadist travel to Syria. Public statements against participation in the struggle in Syria are important signals that can serve to discourage these undertakings.

Finally, it should be observed that the focus on issues related to radicalisation and terrorism in Dutch society has been on the rise. This has led to increased vigilance to the risks of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation.