

Letter of 24 February 2014 from the Minister of Security and Justice, Ivo Opstelten, to the House of Representatives of the States General on the policy implications of the 35th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN35)

The enclosed 35th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN35) states that the threat level remains 'substantial' and that the dominant factor behind this conclusion is the jihadist threat. A steady stream of Dutch nationals are still seeking to join – and are being accepted into – combat groups in Syria allied with al Qa'ida; a smaller number have begun to return to Europe. This trend remains a serious concern. The policy approach to counterterrorism is therefore primarily aimed at containing the threats that may arise from this. The security partners involved also remain alert to other forms of extremism from left-wing, right-wing and animal rights extremists. The existing policy of undertaking criminal investigations (where possible) and providing advice and security awareness training, and promoting the development of expertise (where necessary) continues to be pursued.

The increasing influence of extremist groups in the conflict in Syria is exceptionally worrying. However, it would be a distortion to reduce the revolution against the oppressive Syrian regime to this one aspect; most of the armed opposition groups are not pursuing a jihadist agenda.¹ The jihadist combat groups represent a small minority and differ from other combat groups in Syria in having a wider agenda than driving out Assad's regime. They view their enemy in much broader terms and regard the war they are fighting in Syria as part of a global defensive struggle against the perceived 'enemies of Islam'. In their opinion these enemies include apostate, unIslamic leaders in the Muslim world, traitors, Shiites, Jews and crusaders (i.e. Western powers, including the Netherlands). After taking control of an area, they introduce their extremist version of an Islamic legal order, and the local population then suffers heavily as a consequence of the hate and violence directed against anyone who does not adhere to their ideology. It is therefore not surprising that the other opposition combat groups are now turning against these extremists. The Dutch nationals who have travelled there are now coming under fire from people they had been seeking to help. The ceaseless propaganda war, including the threats to those who hold or express dissenting views, also forms an integral part of this jihadist struggle. Violence is used as a means of legitimisation and recruitment.

¹ See the recent letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the current situation in North Africa and the Middle East (18 December 2013, no. 32 623).

Jihadists from the Netherlands are currently foot soldiers in this battle. It is important to realise that, before leaving the country, these individuals will often have been active in jihadist circles for a greater or lesser period of time, in the virtual or real world. It is essential to consider this broader context to the threat in assessing and tackling the threat of violence posed by returning jihadist travellers. This is the challenge that faces the partners in the Dutch counterterrorism community.

In the policy letters concerning previous threat assessments, I outlined the contours of our approach, which we continue to follow. Our attention is focused on jihadist travellers and particularly returnees. I discussed the progress made during my meeting of 19 December 2013 with the parliamentary committee on security and justice. Having promised at that meeting to keep you informed about the measures taken, I am now able to inform you as follows:

- Consultations have been held on the bill amending the Netherlands Nationality Act to extend the scope for deprivation and loss of Dutch nationality in the case of terrorist activities (in accordance with the motion by Klaas Dijkhoff et al, 29 754, no. 224). The bill is now being prepared for submission to the Council of State.
- Consideration is being given to the scope for extending the use of travel information on a national scale and for international cooperation in this respect. A letter on the matter will be sent to the House in the spring.
- If there is good reason to suspect that when abroad an individual will act in a way that poses a threat to Netherlands (e.g. by joining al Qa'ida combat groups), his/her passport can be cancelled (in accordance with section 23 of the Passport Act). There have been 11 such cases so far, and further cases are under consideration. This measure may also be taken in the framework of probation procedures.
- The Anti-terrorist Sanctions Order 2007-II, under which the Minister of Foreign Affairs can order an individual's bank accounts to be frozen, has been applied in four cases. Further cases are currently under discussion.
- Benefit payments to all known jihadist travellers have been stopped. All other forms of allowances are being stopped or reduced wherever possible.
- Various operational police investigations are currently under way, some of which are targeting possible recruiters. A number of minors have been prevented from leaving the country under provisions of juvenile law and placed under supervision orders or in secure young offenders' institutions.

- The National Public Prosecutors' Office aims to conduct criminal prosecutions wherever possible, giving priority to cases involving minors or certain relevant factors, such as firearms risks or serious radicalisation. In October 2013 the courts gave judgment concerning two individuals planning to leave the country to participate in jihad. One of them was convicted of attempted murder (but discharged from prosecution on account of diminished responsibility). The other was convicted of preparing an arson attack and distributing texts inciting the commission of criminal offences or acts of violence against public authority.
- Substantial investments continue to be made in the local approach, coordinated by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV). Multidisciplinary case conferences are held in all relevant municipalities with a view to agreeing on an approach tailored to the local circumstances. The local partners are assisted by various experts; public servants, community police officers and other front-line workers are receiving training in identification and intervention. A practical manual is being developed to provide assistance with this approach and to put the subject on the radar of all municipalities. It will be available in April. The municipalities will be notified of this, for instance through the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), as was promised to the House on 19 December 2013.
- I regularly speak to my counterparts in EU member states which also have to deal with the problem of jihadist travellers. This informal group is also being expanded to include the United States, Canada, Australia and (in due course) Turkey and Morocco. Within the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), the Netherlands and Morocco are playing a leading role in putting the subject of foreign terrorist fighters on the agenda. To this end, the first in a series of three meetings was held in The Hague on 19 and 20 February, involving more than 27 Western and non-Western countries.
- Specific steps are also being taken to intensify bilateral cooperation. The Netherlands and Turkey recently agreed to strengthen police cooperation in combating the threat posed by the travel movements of jihadists to and from Syria. One way in which this will be done is through the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2014.

Parallel to the perpetrator-centred approach, the government is also focusing more broadly on jihadist radicalisation in the Netherlands. This issue is taking on added dimensions as a consequence of the complex dynamic in Syria, as well as in other countries in North Africa and the Middle East, given the scale on which jihadist travel is now occurring and the ideological debate erupting all across the world in relation to this problem.

- There is a great need for a better understanding of these new trends.
The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and the NCTV are currently working on a memorandum on trends in radicalisation in the Netherlands, which will be completed at the start of the spring.
- At my meeting of 19 December 2013 with the parliamentary committee on security and justice, I promised to present a letter on Muslim fundamentalism in the Netherlands. The House will receive this letter in the spring.
- An active approach is being taken to tackling the spread of jihadist ideology. Wherever possible, criminal proceedings are being launched to tackle incitement to hatred or to the commission of criminal offences or acts of violence against public authority. Extremist messages are also brought to the attention of internet providers and website administrators, to encourage them to fulfil their responsibility to remove them, in accordance with their own conditions of use. In the same vein, we are also strengthening cooperation with our European partners and relations with private sector internet partners at national and EU level. The Netherlands is playing an active role in encouraging these developments.
- The issue of jihadist radicalisation is also connected with aspects of integration policy, in the sense that radicalisation may cause social segregation and polarisation and undermine support for core democratic values. Given the essential connection between social affairs, criminal law enforcement, public order and security, I am working with the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment on this front. In his letter of 2 February 2014 (32 824, no. 49) the Minister stated that his priorities included strengthening the resistance of individuals and groups that may be susceptible to jihadist messages. The Minister and I therefore hold frequent inter-authority discussions about the local approach with the mayors of the municipalities involved.
- At my meeting of 19 December 2013 with the parliamentary committee on security and justice I discussed the threats received by Muslims who speak out against jihadist travel. The Minister of Social Affairs and Employment has spoken to some of those who have been threatened, and the NCTV is also in contact with them. Local authorities are alert to this issue, and their approach to it focuses on these individuals' safety.

DTN35 describes once again the threat posed to the Netherlands by jihadism. In this letter I have provided up-to-date information on the measures currently being taken to reduce the numbers being radicalised, to prevent jihadist travel from the Netherlands, and in particular to contain the potential risks posed by individuals returning from conflict zones abroad. These measures are embedded in an intensive, coordinated approach that spans the entire

field of counterterrorism activities, both at national and international level. This entails identifying such individuals, investigating and prosecuting offences, pursuing intervention through an administrative approach, and undertaking preventive community efforts. Jihadism and radicalisation require a broad, cohesive and powerful response, and this is what all of the partners in the counterterrorism community are currently pursuing.