

**Letter of 12 November 2014 from the Minister of Security and Justice to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, concerning the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN37) and policy implications.**

Recent developments in the world and in the Netherlands show that the threat of terrorist attacks by jihadists is increasingly real. These developments confirm the need for the Dutch government to do everything it can to prevent attacks and efforts by destructive forces to undermine open society and democracy. Attacks on military personnel and police officers in Canada and the US, foiled plots in various Western countries and the trend towards radicalisation and jihadist travel to Syria and Iraq highlight the dangers.

The present Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN37, see Annexe 1) shows that we are dealing with a diffuse and ever-changing threat. The terrorist threat level in the Netherlands therefore remains set at 'substantial', meaning that the chance of an attack is real. There are, however, no specific indications that an attack is being prepared. This letter discusses the key factors underlying the current threat, and the policy implications of DTN37. In response to the motion by MP Bram van Ojik (Parliamentary Papers 29 754, no. 29), an analysis of global jihadism and reflections on radicalisation have been included as an annexe.

**DTN37**

The current threat is shaped by the following key elements: international terrorist networks, the problems associated with jihadist travellers and returnees, and the reciprocal dynamic between events in the Middle East and North Africa and jihadist groups in the West. Moreover, following the airstrikes by the international coalition, jihadist groups have explicitly issued fatwas and appeals to like-minded people in the West, calling on them to carry out attacks there too. The Netherlands' participation in the military coalition fighting ISIS in Iraq has also raised our profile among jihadists.

The threat of an attack in the Netherlands is largely connected with the presence of Western jihadists in the combat zones in Syria and Iraq. Several thousand people from Europe are currently fighting there, mainly with jihadist groups in Syria. They include several dozen jihadists from the Netherlands. These jihadists pose a real threat the moment they return. Western jihadists trained in Syria or Iraq – including Dutch nationals – could be ordered by the al Qa'ida core, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) or other groups to carry out attacks in the West or against Western interests elsewhere. Returning jihadists may also more or less

independently decide to carry out an attack in their own country or elsewhere, as was the case with the French national who targeted the Jewish Museum in Brussels in May 2014.

Although politicians and the media are focusing strongly on ISIS, the international terrorist threat is broader and more diffuse. Various jihadist terrorist groups – the al Qa'ida core, al Qa'ida affiliates like JaN and AQAP (Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula) and ISIS, which broke away from al Qa'ida – have for some time had the intention to carry out attacks on the West, possibly including the Netherlands. These terrorist groups operate via transnational networks consisting of jihadists residing both in the West and in the Middle East and North Africa. Dutch nationals are also part of these networks. The continuing discord within the jihadist movement between the al Qa'ida core and ISIS may serve to increase the threat.

In the period under review, it has also become clear that even jihadists who live in the West and who have not been to any jihadist conflict zone may commit acts of violence in their own country. This appears to have been the case in Canada, where on two occasions in October 2014 jihadists who had become radicalised in their own country carried out attacks on military personnel. A terrorist plot in Australia which was foiled in September 2014 also involved an ISIS sympathiser who intended to commit acts of violence. A similar situation is also conceivable in the Netherlands. The threat to the Netherlands, therefore, is not limited to jihadist travellers and returnees.

In addition, we are seeing an intensification of the dynamic between the jihadist groups operating in the Middle East and North Africa and jihadist movements in the West. Jihadist groups profit from the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, ISIS's advance attracts jihadists from around the world, and jihadist groups make clever use of social media. This hugely accelerates the proliferation of jihadist ideologies. The conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa contribute to the proliferation of jihadist ideologies and the revival of jihadist movements worldwide, and vice versa.

By stepping up its approach to jihadism and deciding to participate in the international coalition against ISIS, the Netherlands is raising its profile as an opponent of jihadist movements, including ISIS. This renders it more conceivable that we will become a target for ISIS, but also for other jihadist groups in Syria, like Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS has already called for attacks to be carried out in the countries participating in the military mission. Jabhat al-Nusra has also warned the countries involved of the possibility of attacks on their own territory. Individual jihadists are also increasingly calling for attacks in the West. A Dutch member of Jabhat al-Nusra, for instance, recently called on people to 'take action' against

the Netherlands. Overt threats like this indicate that jihadists' motivation to carry out attacks in the West, and therefore in the Netherlands, has increased. We must not, however, exaggerate the matter. Even before it was announced the Netherlands would take part in the military mission, jihadists viewed the Netherlands as an enemy of Islam and as an ally of America and Israel.

### **DTN37 policy implications**

DTN37 shows that the terrorist threat level in the Netherlands remains substantial, meaning that the chance of a terrorist attack in the Netherlands is real. The current trend – a long-term jihadist threat which should not be underestimated – continues and, with attacks being carried out in other Western countries, is taking increasingly concrete forms. This calls for strong preventive and enforcement measures.

DTN37 has again made it clear that the current threat is a global problem and countering it must be a shared, international responsibility. The Netherlands is therefore actively involved in international efforts, such as the EU Leading Group on Foreign Fighters, the Global Counterterrorism Forum and the military coalition in Iraq. Never before has Dutch participation in an international military mission been so directly linked to security in our own country. After all our deployment in the region is aimed at combating groups who are targeting *our* security too. These groups must be considered willing and able to carry out attacks in Europe, including the Netherlands. The Netherlands' participation therefore directly benefits our own national security.

In the Netherlands itself, it remains necessary, as stated previously, to continue our integrated approach. Since March 2013, the efforts of all services and authorities involved have been stepped up with regard to the elements underlying the threats identified in DTN37. This ongoing domestic approach and cooperation has been given an extra boost by the plan of action 'An Integrated Approach to Jihadism' (Parliamentary Papers 29754, no. 253), which describes this policy.

The dynamics of the current threat situation require a broad range of intervention options, such as administrative and financial measures, measures related to intelligence and criminal law, and investment in prevention. To deal with this threat, we must constantly weigh up the situation. Stopping radicalised persons from travelling abroad, for instance, is a well-considered decision. It is intended to prevent them from becoming more radicalised, gaining combat experience, committing terrorist acts in or against the West or attracting new jihadist travellers. Moreover, it is more difficult for the intelligence services to monitor people if they

have left the country. The downside to this measure is that preventing people from travelling abroad may lead to frustration, and a risk of them carrying out an attack in the Netherlands. Besides these interventions to prevent jihadist travel, all security bodies involved – including local authorities – must employ the full range of institutions and administrative resources at their disposal to keep a close eye on these persons and endeavour to extricate them from jihadist circles.

All options are being pursued to limit the risks posed by jihadists (including travellers). Effective police operations and the efforts of the judicial authorities have recently led to a number of arrests and thwarted several attempts to travel to conflict zones. There are currently more than 30 jihad-related criminal investigations under way, focusing on around 60 persons. They involve suspected cases of conspiracy to participate in armed conflict, preparation of terrorist acts, incitement to commit criminal offences or acts of violence against public authority, possession and dissemination of jihadist texts, and facilitation and promotion of jihadist travel.

A targeted approach to jihadism must be rooted in a broader approach to preventing radicalisation more generally. The growing number of young people attracted to radical ideas, their social isolation and the hatred this may inspire require a balanced approach consisting of preventive and enforcement measures. The Netherlands has ample experience with this kind of broad and comprehensive approach to terrorism.

Prevention, i.e. identifying radicalisation at an early stage, delegitimising the jihadist discourse on the internet and elsewhere, improving groups' resistance to radicalisation and carrying out successful intervention strategies, is crucial in order to diminish the threat in the longer term. Jihadist propaganda homes in on the feelings of deprivation and exclusion among parts of the Muslim community. It claims to provide an alternative, formulated in religious terms. Through cult-like mechanisms, susceptible young people are disengaged from their parents and social surroundings, brainwashed and turned against society.<sup>1</sup> Our policy is aimed at exposing and countering these recruitment attempts.

The Dutch people are generally resilient to jihadism. However, recent signs that young Muslims in the Netherlands identify with the armed struggle in Syria and Iraq are a cause for concern. The support among young Turkish-Dutch people for IS and the violence committed by jihadists groups against people with different beliefs in Syria and Iraq, as well as their

---

<sup>1</sup> See Annexe 2 'Global Jihadism: Analysis of the Phenomenon and Reflections on Radicalisation'.

extremist anti-Semitic views, are particularly worrying. These findings raise the question of where these views come from. The Minister of Social Affairs and Employment has agreed with the four Turkish religious organisations that they will discuss this matter. It goes without saying that action will be taken against any form of violent jihad, anti-Semitism and calls to commit violent acts.

Lastly, several preventive measures have been taken to improve resilience against possible attacks and there is extra police surveillance at a number of buildings and institutions. All counterterrorism partners are working to combat the jihadist movement and protect the democratic constitutional state, but it is impossible to say for certain whether the various measures will always have the intended effect. Firm security guarantees cannot be given.

### **Van Ojik motion**

Annexe 2 to this letter comprises an analysis of the global jihadism phenomenon and reflections on radicalisation. This analysis comes in response to the Van Ojik motion (Parliamentary Papers 29 754, no. 29) requesting an analysis of the jihadism phenomenon and a reflection on radicalisation. Like the DTN, it is an independent analysis by the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), written by the same experts who write the quarterly threat assessment. It is supplemental to the various analyses of jihadism and radicalisation published over the past few years, which form the basis of Dutch counterterrorism policy, in particular the report by the General Intelligence and Security Service entitled 'The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands'.<sup>2</sup> The elements discussed in this phenomenon analysis were also used to draw up the plan of action. If developments give cause for further analysis of global jihadism, this will be included in a future NCTV threat assessment (DTN).

During the debate of 4 September 2014, member of parliament Bram van Ojik also asked about recent studies and evaluations of previous measures (Van Ojik motion, Parliamentary Papers 29 754, no. 259). These are listed in Annexe 3. These studies and evaluations were used in drawing up the plan of action, but two qualifications must be added here. First, it has proven to be difficult to measure the effectiveness of steps taken to prevent radicalisation and terrorism. Second, the previous evaluations and studies pertained to the situation at the time of their writing and the dynamics have changed drastically since then. Whether the current set of measures in the plan of action will continue to be adequate in the future will depend, among other things, on the further development of radicalisation and terrorism.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'The transformation of jihadism in the Netherlands: swarm dynamics and new strength', General Intelligence and Security Service, June 2014.

They will in any case be included in the scheduled comprehensive evaluation of the 2011-2015 period.

At my meeting with the parliamentary committee on security and justice on 10 March 2011 and in the Counterterrorism Strategy 2011-2015, I pledged to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of Dutch counterterrorism policy every five years. This five-year evaluation cycle provides insight into the legitimacy, proportionality, functioning and results of our counterterrorism measures. A first evaluation of Dutch counterterrorism policy led to a publication entitled 'Counterterrorism measures in the Netherlands in the First Decade of the 21st Century'. As mentioned, the second comprehensive evaluation will cover the 2011-2015 period. This evaluation will be based on the strategic choices made in the National Counterterrorism Strategy for 2011-2015, and will focus on the policy-related efforts, the results of those efforts and the associated costs.<sup>3</sup> The evaluation system which has been chosen ties in with the evaluation framework developed during the previous evaluation, and is supplemented by a method which gives clear insight into programming, implementation and management. The evaluation will be done via the Research and Documentation Centre, which is in line with the House's wish to have the evaluation carried out by an objective party. The Comprehensive Review of the National Counterterrorism Strategy should be completed in early 2016.

## **Conclusion**

The fight in Syria has served as a catalyst, creating new dynamics which have led to a resurgence of global jihadism, culminating in the formation of ISIS. Consequently, Europe, and with it the Netherlands, is facing security problems which are unprecedented in terms of scale and scope. This development has compelled us to intensify and broaden existing measures, to modify our policy instruments and to propose new measures, as set out in the plan of action. The effectiveness of the efforts is also reflected in what we have accomplished so far, as described in the progress report, which Minister of Social Affairs and Employment Lodewijk Asscher and I are sending to the House at the same time as these documents.

Annexes:

1. Summary of the National Terrorist Threat Assessment (DTN37).
2. Global Jihadism: Analysis of the Phenomenon and Reflections on Radicalisation.
3. An overview of studies and evaluations regarding previous measures.

---

<sup>3</sup> House of Representatives, 2013-2014, annexe to 29754, no. 232.