

## **Summary of the National Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN35), February 2014**

### **Threat level**

The threat level in the Netherlands remains 'substantial', meaning that the chance of an attack is real. The jihadist threat remains the dominant factor in the threat assessment. The threat posed by jihadists in the Netherlands, particularly those travelling to and returning from Syria, did not diminish in the period under review. The number of jihadists travellers from the Netherlands continues to increase. There are also increasing concerns about the growing numbers of returnees with combat experience in Syria. Besides the risk of jihadists returning with plans for attacks, the authorities in north western European countries are already seeing some returnees playing a radicalising and recruiting role in jihadist forums and social media. Some are also playing an active facilitating role in relation to the conflict in Syria.

A further relevant development is the continuing open manifestation of jihadism in the Netherlands, both on the internet and in the physical world. The messages of support for and displays of loyalty to groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), the two dominant internationally-oriented jihadist groups in Syria, are worrying. Although the pro-jihadists are not directly inciting violence in the Netherlands, their fanaticism in propagating a fiercely anti-Western and violent ideology could actually have a provocative effect in the longer term and lead to the legitimisation of acts of violence against Western targets. The public manifestation of these sentiments is also evident in the intimidation of Muslim clerics and other leading figures from the community who speak out against jihadist travel and al Qa'ida's message of violence. As a result, some of these individuals may be less willing to denounce jihadist travel and al Qa'ida, whether in public or behind closed doors. This development is putting pressure on resistance to extremism and ideologically-motivated violence within Muslim communities.

### **International context of the jihadist threat**

Unrest in the Muslim world has clearly bolstered jihadist forces in several Muslim countries. A number of Muslim countries have witnessed an increase in jihadist-inspired violence, in some cases partly as a consequence of the conflict in Syria. These developments have worked to the advantage of the al Qa'ida core and constituted its main reason for shifting the focus of global jihad from Afghanistan/Pakistan to the Middle East. The group is now investing heavily in the Syrian conflict, which it regards as the jihadist movement's greatest opportunity for many years. One illustration of the importance attached to Syria is the fact

the al Qa'ida core has facilitated the transfer of hundreds of jihadists from Afghanistan/Pakistan to Syria over the past year. These have included both 'ordinary' combatants and senior members of the al Qa'ida core. The civil war in Syria is also giving the al Qa'ida core an opportunity to present itself as the 'vanguard of the jihadist movement'. There are indications that ISIL, as a result of its growing influence in the Middle East, is developing into a jihadist alternative to the al Qa'ida core. Although both groups subscribe to the same ideology, ISIL pursues an independent course from the al Qa'ida core.

At the same time, Syria is increasingly becoming a haven for jihadists. Not only is it a war zone, but there are also areas being governed according to al Qa'ida-inspired ideology. This is partly due to the fact that groups in Syria related with al Qa'ida effectively control areas that had been relatively calm – at least until early January 2014, when various rebel groups took up arms against ISIL. A growing number of combatants from various countries are involved in the conflict, including in 'peaceful' areas. This has given rise to a safe haven where – as with Afghanistan in the past – an international community of combatants is being schooled in al Qa'ida's ideology, receiving training, gaining real experience and making contacts. Against this backdrop, Syria's close proximity to Europe gives cause for concern.

In terms of propaganda, circumstances are also currently working to the advantage of the al Qa'ida core and allied groups. In many Western countries, al Qa'ida's message of global jihad has gained renewed attention, mainly as a result of the conflict in Syria. The jihadist call to join the struggle in Syria has had the effect of promoting recruitment in many countries. In many European countries, the propaganda being produced by supporters of jihadist groups in Syria like JaN and ISIL is in effect contributing to the spread of the al Qa'ida core's ideals. Combined with the power of the internet, the relative ease with which people can move between Syria and the rest of the world promotes the spread of al Qa'ida's jihadist ideals.

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

Given developments in the various conflict zones, it can be concluded that the operational strength of the jihadist combat groups active there is increasing rather than decreasing. In Syria, ISIL's strong advances in recent months and the ensuing crackdown have prompted resistance both from civilians and other rebel groups. In early 2014, this resistance resulted in a large-scale armed offensive by other rebel groups against ISIL. The hostilities mainly targeted ISIL's foreign combatants and their families. Some Syrian groups have taken advantage of the situation to attack foreign combatants from other groups, including JaN. There are several reports indicating that JaN is fighting on the side of the rebels against the

ISIL. This is a remarkable development, since both groups are allied to al Qa'ida. It remains to be seen whether the attacks on ISIL will leave the group permanently weakened over the longer term. Many of ISIL's foreign combatants are reported to have sought protection from other groups. Other foreign combatants, including those not affiliated with ISIL, have fled Syria. It is also clear that those combatants who remain loyal to ISIL are now becoming entangled in a violent struggle with the other rebel groups.

The unrest in Syria has spilled over into several other countries. For instance, the Syrian conflict is threatening to disrupt Lebanon's fragile stability. Hezbollah's military support to Syrian President Assad has been a particular factor in the recent heightened tensions between Sunnis and Shiites. Given the spill over effects of the Syrian conflict, the security situation in parts of Lebanon gives cause for concern. JaN and ISIL are also looking to expand the conflict into Lebanon. Both groups have now claimed responsibility for attacks in Lebanon. Iraq is also experiencing the disruptive effect of the Syrian conflict. ISIL, originally an Iraqi group, has stepped up its activities in that country, apparently encouraged by its growing influence in Syria. ISIL is also benefiting from rising political tensions between Iraq's Sunni minority and Shiite majority. Attacks by ISIL have caused a deterioration in the general security situation in Iraq. There was an escalation in early January 2014 when, within a short period of time, ISIL succeeded in gaining control (of parts) of two major cities in western Iraq.

In Yemen, al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has further strengthened its position in recent months. In the second half of 2013, the terrorist threat posed by AQAP to Western targets in Yemen increased markedly. In Somalia, al Shabaab has succeeded in strengthening its position. This has put pressure on the military progress made since the summer of 2011. The situation in Mali remains unstable. The number of attacks, particularly in the north of the country, actually began to rise again at the end of 2013. Although the organisational and technical capability of the jihadist groups was weakened by the French intervention, it gradually began to increase again at the end of 2013. The army-controlled government in Egypt has further stepped up its crackdown on jihadists in recent months. As a result, the jihadists have suffered painful losses. However, this has certainly not eliminated the threat of attacks, including attacks on Western interests.

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

The jihadist threat to the West remains undiminished. In Europe, this ongoing threat is largely an outgrowth of jihadist travel to Syria. The number of individuals from Europe joining the armed opposition in Syria continues to rise. Estimates at the end of 2013 ranged from 1,200 to 2,000. Most of those travelling to Syria from north western Europe are young (aged

under 25) and some are women. Almost all the Europeans who travel to Syria join ISIL or JaN.

The number of returnees is a cause for concern to the governments of north western European countries. Increasingly, individuals are travelling back and forth between Syria and Europe. Besides the risk of jihadists returning with plans for attacks, the authorities in north western European countries are already seeing some returnees playing a radicalising and recruiting role in jihadist forums and social media. Some are also playing an active facilitating role in relation to the conflict in Syria. Finally, it should not be forgotten that a number of the returnees pose no direct threat.

It must be stressed that European returnees are a European problem. For instance, given the open borders in the Schengen area, French returnees may decide to carry out an attack in Belgium.

### **Threat to the Netherlands**

Developments relating to jihadist travel to Syria are one of the most important factors in the current threat assessment. The latest figures show that the number of jihadist travellers continues to rise. At the start of February 2014, the total number of jihadists who had travelled from the Netherlands since the summer of 2012 exceeded 100, more than 70 of them are still in Syria. At least 10 people have since died. The relatively large increase in the number of female jihadist travellers in the last three months of 2012 is striking. This may be connected with the fact that – at least until recently – Syria was relatively safe for women. Almost all of the jihadist travellers from the Netherlands to Syria join JaN or ISIL.

The number of returnees since October 2013 has also risen to more than 20. This number may increase further in the coming months as a result of hostilities against foreign combatants, particularly those associated with ISIL. These hostilities have prompted several Dutch jihadists to flee northern Syria. Some wish to return to the Netherlands, while others prefer to remain in the region. The impact of the hostilities on further jihadist travel from the Netherlands to Syria is also unclear. It may become more difficult for jihadist travellers to reach the places where foreign combatants are to be found.

The threat posed by jihadists in the Netherlands, particularly those travelling to and returning from Syria, did not diminish in the period under review. Developments remain worrying. As indicated above, individuals are continuing to travel to Syria, fervently encouraged by like-minded individuals in the Netherlands and Syria through a variety of social and other media

channels. It is also clear that most of the jihadist combatants in Syria gain combat experience, commit atrocities and become even more radicalised. Several more returnees with combat experience are now back in the Netherlands.

### **Violent radicalisation and polarisation**

As reported in previous DTNs, jihadism is being professed ever more openly in the Netherlands, both on the internet and in the physical world. The protest at the Belgian and Moroccan embassies in The Hague in December 2013 is a clear example of this. Formally, the protest was intended to express support for like-minded 'brothers' in prison. In fact, however, the protest was a show of support for and loyalty to ISIL and JaN. The open way in which the protesters chanted their slogans indicates that they care little for any negative consequences that may ensue from their extremist views. The participants in the demonstration were not directly inciting violence in the Netherlands. However, their fanaticism in propagating a fiercely anti-Western and violent ideology could actually have a provocative effect in the longer term and lead to the legitimisation of acts of violence against Western targets. Furthermore, the ongoing increase in the volume of jihadist propaganda on the internet took on an added dimension in October 2013 with the online publication of a Dutch language jihadist manifesto entitled *De Banier* ('The Banner'). This manifesto presents the global jihadist ideology to a Dutch-speaking public in an incisive manner. It is a stridently anti-Western pamphlet that can be regarded as an instrument to support the jihadist narrative.

During the period under review there was little unlawful activity by extremists in the Netherlands. However, there remains a small core group of asylum rights extremists who continue to believe that it is legitimate to oppose Dutch and European asylum policy by unlawful means. For instance, in December 2013 asylum rights extremists attempted to occupy Europe House in The Hague. When this attempt failed, they briefly occupied the small island in the Hofvijver pond. In contrast, neo-Nazis in the Netherlands appear to have virtually no organisational or recruitment capacity left. There have been no neo-Nazi demonstrations in our country since July 2013. However, the right wing extremist party the Dutch People's Union (NVU) is taking part in municipal elections in three municipalities on 19 March 2014. The threat posed by animal rights extremists in the Netherlands is also declining. The illegal video recordings, minor vandalism and break-ins perpetrated at some livestock farms in the autumn of 2013 are of a different order than the violent action taken by such extremists in 2008 and 2009.

## **Resistance**

Earlier DTNs have reported that the Dutch public is generally resistant to extremism and violence committed on ideological grounds. There are no indications of any significant decrease in this resistance. However, there are worrying signs that resistance within Muslim communities is increasingly coming under pressure as a consequence of the intimidating action taken by pro-jihadist youths. Prominent Salafists and other Muslim leaders are criticised strongly by jihadists if they speak out against jihadist travel, particularly the personal participation of Dutch Muslims in the Syrian conflict. Intimidation from jihadists could make leaders less willing to comment on jihadist travel to Syria, whether in public or behind closed doors, for fear of losing their authority or endangering their personal safety. Some leaders say that a 'dangerous polarisation' is occurring within Muslim communities. Apparently, security arrangements have become a virtual necessity at debates about Islam and democracy and the conflict in Syria.