

Summary of the 36th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN36), June 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 most important factor in the threat assessment. Although much remains unclear about the background of the terrorist attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May, all information suggests that it was carried out by a jihadist who had fought in Syria. This attack illustrates the threat posed by jihadists who have fought in Syria and are now returning to Europe. This threat factor was the main reason for the NCTV to raise the threat level from 'limited' to 'substantial' in March 2013. The attack in Brussels, which was carried out by a French national, demonstrates that the threat posed by returning jihadists affects all of Europe. It also shows that returnees can carry out attacks in places outside their countries of origin. This means that all Syria 'veterans' returning to Europe could potentially constitute a threat to the Netherlands. It is also troubling that Dutch jihadists are still heading to Syria to join jihadist combat groups there, like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, aka ISIS) – a full two years after this phenomenon began. The military progress made by this terrorist organisation in Iraq in June 2014 is a dangerous development, in part because it could serve to draw in Western jihadists. The emergence of a new generation of European jihadist fighters in Syria and possibly Iraq, including Dutch nationals, is becoming a long-term security problem for Europe, and for that reason it will remain a key focus of the authorities in the years ahead.

The conflict in Syria and Iraq is not the only international factor contributing to the jihadist threat, however. In various countries in the Middle East and North Africa, jihadist groups are exploiting local conflicts, instability or weak governments. The deterioration of the security situation in Libya is another negative trend. Here, local and international jihadist terrorist organisations are likely to become more active and to use the country as a base of operations for activities elsewhere.

Less visible in the media, but still relevant to the terrorist threat, are the examples of non-jihadist terrorist attacks. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, there were a new number of incidents involving violent individuals on the far right. There are currently no indications for such an attack in the Netherlands.

International context of the jihadist threat

The conflict between ISIL, on the one hand, and Jabhat al Nusra (JaN) and the al Qa'ida core, on the other, continues to drag on. In early January 2014 this internecine struggle escalated when JaN took part in the armed offensive by various rebel groups against ISIL. This mounting conflict between ISIL and JaN/the al Qa'ida core is not confined to Syria; indeed, it has sparked major tensions within the international jihadist movement as a whole. It is notable that a significant proportion of individual jihadists and radical websites express support for ISIL. At the same time, there has also been a great deal of criticism of the head of the al Qa'ida core, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who some contributors to online jihadist forums believe should step down. Given that attempts at

reconciliation have thus far proved unsuccessful, the global jihadist movement may be on the point of a schism. This is unlikely to have any effect on the threat to the West. Both JaN/the al Qa'ida core and ISIL are willing and able to mount terrorist attacks in the West. It is even possible that these groups will make more of an effort to attack the West, motivated by a desire to raise their own international profile.

International threat: Africa and Asia

In early June 2014 tensions between Sunnis and Shiites in *Iraq*, which have long been a cause for concern, began to spiral out of control. The jihadist group ISIL, in collaboration with other Sunni groups, has managed to gain control of a large part of the country. Images of atrocities committed by ISIL have led to a wave of outrage around the world. These developments could spark a civil war between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. The advances made by ISIL also magnify its appeal to foreign jihadists. Because ISIL is also active in neighbouring Syria, there is now a large swath of territory in the Middle East under the control of jihadists. In a safe haven like this, foreign jihadists can gain combat experience and also prepare attacks to be carried out in the West even more than is now the case. Moreover, it is already clear that ISIL and its sympathisers around the world, including those in the Netherlands, are exploiting the group's military advances in jihadist propaganda and thus raising the group's status within the global jihadist movement. This could cause more Western jihadists to join ISIL than is now the case.

In *Syria* the armed struggle waged by rebels (jihadists and other insurgents) against the Syrian army and the regime's foreign allies continues unabated. The Assad regime is profiting from deep divisions within the armed opposition and the hostility of various groups to ISIL, but so far, it has been unable to deal a decisive blow to its enemies and end the conflict. In the face of mounting pressure, ISIL has been forced to withdraw deeper and deeper into north-east Syria, which remains a stronghold. For the al Qa'ida core it is strategically important that JaN has a strong position in Syria and thus function as a counterweight to ISIL. JaN and ISIL are also active in neighbouring *Lebanon*. Both groups were responsible for a number of major attacks on Hezbollah targets in the country. This is because this Shiite group from Lebanon supports the Syrian regime in its fight in Syria against the insurgents. For the time being, however, tensions between the various ethnic and religious groups in Lebanon have not escalated.

In *Egypt* the offensive undertaken by the authorities at the start of 2014 could not prevent a new series of attacks in Egypt and the Sinai. Those attacks, which mainly targeted the Egyptian army and police, were carried out both by known terrorist organisations like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABaM) and by various new groups. The threat is directed not only at the Egyptian security apparatus and infrastructure, but also at the country's most important sources of income: tourism, the Suez Canal and foreign institutions in Egypt. As a result, Westerners and Western interests are also possible targets. ABaM is in possession of manpads (man-portable air-defence systems) and has the capability to use them, and this poses an ongoing risk to civil aviation in the region. In *Libya* the security situation is worsening due to the fact that there is no longer any effective functioning state authority. Against that backdrop, local and international jihadist terrorist

organisations are likely to become more active in the country and/or to use Libya as a base of operations for activities elsewhere. The prominent jihadist Moktha Belmokthar is believed to be living there, possibly with a view to preparing an attack on Western targets in the region. In *Yemen* the violence perpetrated by Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) continues unabated, despite the many drone attacks. The threat to security authorities and Western interests in Yemen remains high.

The unremittingly brutal actions of the jihadist terrorist group Boko Haram in *Nigeria* has led to an international outcry and the involvement of the international community. So far, the group's activities have been confined to the country itself. The possible involvement of Western countries in fighting Boko Haram could cause the group to take a greater interest in Western targets in the region as a whole. Both rebel groups and jihadist groups continue to have a negative impact on the security situation in *Northern Mali*. The city of Gao has also been attacked a number of times. The Dutch contingent of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is stationed in this city. Al Shabaab's position in *Somalia* and *Kenya* remains strong. Other countries with troops in Somalia to fight al Shabaab have reason to fear retaliatory attacks by this terrorist group. The attack by al Shabaab on a French restaurant in *Djibouti* on 24 May 2014 only reaffirms this threat.

The Afghan Taliban did not succeed in disrupting the presidential election in *Afghanistan* of April and June 2014 with major attacks. However, in the preceding weeks, the group did carry out several attacks that specifically targeted foreigners and the international community in Afghanistan.

International threat: Europe and North America

The terrorist threat to Europe and North America is still clear and present. The most important component of this threat is the migration of jihadists from nearly all Western countries to Syria, and the associated risks posed by returnees. The period under review saw the first terrorist attack in Europe carried out by a returnee from Syria. The 29-year-old French national Mehdi N. is suspected of shooting several visitors to the Jewish Museum in Brussels on Saturday 24 May. This attack claimed the lives of four people. It is as yet unclear why the suspect specifically targeted this particular site. This is not the first time that Jewish locations have been the target of jihadist terrorist attacks. The State of Israel and the Jewish people, as alleged enemies of Islam, are an integral part of jihadist propaganda. The attack in Brussels confirms both the transnational character and the seriousness of the current jihadist threat. Not only did this man carry out an attack outside his country of origin; he also travelled through various countries on his way to Europe after leaving Syria. This suggests a strong desire on his part to remain below the radar of the European security agencies. At this point it is unclear whether the man, who French authorities claim fought with ISIL in Syria for a year, was directed to carry out the attack by a foreign group or decided himself. European security agencies have already concluded that jihadist groups in Syria are recruiting, training and tasking (Western) jihadists who can then be sent (back) to Europe to carry out attacks. In the period under review an attack in France by a returnee from

Syria was thwarted by the authorities. He was arrested on 11 February in the vicinity of Cannes. A search of his flat revealed home-made explosives (IEDs), which he presumably intended to use for an attack in France.

The British Office for Security and Counter-terrorism (OSCT) reports in late 2013 that the threat posed by individual right-wing extremists in the UK has risen in the past year. There was at least one such example in the UK in during the period under review, though the authorities were able to track down the man in question in time. In May 2014 a 42-year-old British national was sentenced to 10 years in prison for planning terrorist attacks. The defendant, who held neo-Nazi and anti-Islamic sympathies, aimed to blow up mosques in the north-west of England using home-made explosives. He came to the attention of the police when he used a work computer to look up manuals on making explosives. The US, too, was once again the scene of an act of violence by an individual with far-right views. In Kansas a Vietnam veteran and known racist shot dead three people in the belief they were Jewish.

Threat to the Netherlands

Developments relating to jihadist travel to Syria remain the most important factor in the current threat assessment. The terrorist attack in Brussels demonstrates, as stated in the previous DTN, that European nationals returning from Syria can be active in places besides their country of origin. If another country were to have a higher target profile than their own, the returnees might be inclined to go there.

All Syria 'veterans' returning to Europe could potentially also pose a threat to the Netherlands. Meanwhile, Dutch nationals continue to leave the Netherlands and join up with jihadist groups in Syria. Thus far, this trend shows no sign of being slowed by the internal jihadist struggle between JaN and ISIL. It is troubling that Dutch nationals continue to make the journey to Syria, two years after the phenomenon was first identified. Ongoing jihadist propaganda and the allure of Dutch jihadist fighters in Syria continue to appeal to newly radicalised young people. These forces are generating a continuous stream of jihadist travellers, some of them women. Dutch women in Syria may not take part in combat, but after returning to the Netherlands, they can be just as committed to jihadism as their male counterparts, and thus pose a threat to this country. Previously, there had been indications that Dutch jihadists in Syria were involved in serious violence in that country. The past six months saw the first suicide attacks carried out by Dutch nationals: one in Iraq and one in Syria.

Dutch jihadist propaganda continues to be spread mainly by Dutch jihadists via social media, and is therefore easily accessible to the public. This propaganda is meant to encourage young people to fight for the jihad in Syria and other jihadist conflict zones. In addition, the character of jihadist propaganda on Dutch-language jihadist Facebook groups is becoming increasingly violent, glorifying suicide attacks in jihadist conflicts zones. A risk of such content is that it can embolden its audience to act on their radical ideas.

Returning jihadists not only pose a threat in terms of the danger of attacks or radicalisation; some may commit criminal offences to gather funds for jihad. This is clear from the arrest of three people in the Netherlands in the first half of 2014 on suspicion of planning violent robberies in the Netherlands for the purpose of financially supporting international jihad.

Violent radicalisation and polarisation

The profound changes in the radical Islamic landscape in the Netherlands over the past two years should be seen in the context of international developments. Until around two years ago, radical Islamic groups scarcely had a platform in the Netherlands. Developments elsewhere, principally Syria, have created a favourable climate for these kinds of groups. The use of violence by jihadists in Syria is regarded as legitimate by radical Islamists in the Netherlands. By putting propagandist spin on current events, they are attracting young people to the jihadist world-view and expanding their potential following. For example, in their propaganda Dutch jihadists are exploiting the sectarian conflict in Syria and Iraq to demonise Shiites. For now, this propaganda does not include any specific, direct threats to Dutch Shiite individuals or organisations, though it does increase the risk of greater polarisation and possible escalation between these two branches of Islam in the Netherlands.

During the Nuclear Security Summit (held in The Hague on 24 and 25 March 2014) and in the weeks leading up to it, left-wing extremists mounted a number of 'lightweight' extremist actions. Asylum rights extremists, who are typically the most active group on the far left, engaged in a relatively small number of (unlawful) actions. However, there are no indications that the small group of hardcore asylum rights extremists intend to swear off unlawful activity for the long term. Once again, animal rights extremists have remained relatively quiet. No large-scale illegal protest activities have taken place. During the period under review, protests against gas extraction in the province of Groningen have intensified. The government's plans to modify gas extraction practices and provide compensation have not dissuaded hardcore members of the opposition from further action. Earlier this year "GroenFront!", a nationwide radical environmental group, became involved in the radical opposition to gas extraction. As a result, protest actions since January 2014 have become both more professional and uncompromising.

It has been a decade since far right activists were capable of mobilising large groups of people for their activities. Even so, various right-wing extremist groups have been trying to exploit current events for their own gain. In announcing demonstrations, the far right has sought to capitalise on social polarisation, the events in Deurne (see below) and the parole of Volkert van der Graaf (the murderer of Pim Fortuyn). All these initiatives attract media coverage, which is part of the point, but as before, they seem to have little impact on the growth of right-wing extremism as a movement. Such initiatives can, however, provoke confrontations with ethnic minorities or activists on the far left, or further exacerbate social polarisation between various segments of the population.

The polarised discussion of Islam in general and the position of the Moroccan-Dutch community in particular has flared up in recent months. In this polarised, heated climate, local incidents are

being given extensive coverage in the national media and the public debate. A robbery on 28 March at a jewellery shop run by a married couple in Deurne, in which the two Moroccan-Dutch robbers were shot dead, led to heated debate on the limits of self-defence and the over-representation of young male ethnic Moroccans in criminal activity. During that same period, reports emerged of a possible assault on a woman dressed in a niqab in Eindhoven, and the mayor of The Hague, Jozias van Aartsen, publicly denounced racist violence in the seaside neighbourhood of Duindorp. Although there is no causal connection between the two incidents, many commentators have claimed there is a link, namely racism in the Netherlands. This could lead some segments of the population to believe they are being attacked. The polarised climate should therefore not simply be regarded as an innocuous outlet for emotion; it also entails risks, since certain 'trigger events' can unleash an unpredictable chain reaction of response and counter-response.

Resistance

In the Netherlands there is a strong aversion to ideologically motivated violence. This also applies to the Muslim community in the Netherlands. There are, however, concerns about that community's long-term resilience. The previous DTN highlighted signals that resilience among Dutch Muslims is coming under increasing pressure due to the intimidating conduct of a small group of jihadist young people. This type of intimidation was again apparent in the run-up to the municipal elections of March 2014. Dutch jihadists vigorously protested against the participation of Muslims in the elections. These jihadists are convinced that Muslims should neither vote nor stand for office because of what they perceive as the un-Islamic character of elections. Despite this, in the end, the targets of this intimidation were, as far as can be determined, not influenced by it and chose to participate in the elections anyway.