

## **Summary of the 38th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN38), March 2015**

### **Threat level**

The threat level in the Netherlands is once more 'substantial', meaning that there is still a realistic possibility that an attack will occur in the Netherlands. The attacks in Paris and Copenhagen and the foiled plot in the Belgian town of Verviers were a stark reminder of the real threat to Europe and the Netherlands that the authorities had previously identified.

The heightened threat to the Netherlands is intimately linked to the involvement of Western and Dutch jihadists in global jihadist combat groups in Syria and Iraq. Yet at the same time, jihadist combatants and returnees are not the sole factor driving the threat. Recent attacks in other Western countries have shown that a threat may be posed by anyone who feels called upon to use violence in the West, whether as a 'lone wolf' or on behalf of a jihadist organisation. Sympathisers in Europe are being infected by the propaganda disseminated from jihadist war zones by the 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' (ISIS). They are also being called on to do their part in the jihadist struggle, by spreading propaganda, participating in the conflict in Syria or even by committing an act in their own country. Global jihadist groups can profit from attacks in the West as they create renewed international momentum, despite the increased pressure brought to bear on them by military interventions. The targeted propaganda being disseminated from the conflict areas can inspire susceptible individuals living in Europe to commit an impulsive act. In this connection the triggering role played by current events should not be underestimated. Jihadists and their sympathisers can point both to images of coalition bombardments of the 'caliphate' and to counterterrorism measures in the West and frame them as evidence of an 'offensive against Islam'. This could heighten the threat against people or objects that symbolise or represent this policy.

The attacks in Paris and the foiled plot in Belgium confirm that jihadists also consider police and military personnel in Western countries to be potential targets. These are the people who are not only responsible for enforcing counterterrorism policy in Western countries (and beyond), but also for protecting ordinary citizens in Western societies from jihadist attacks and thus reducing public anxiety. In other words, those who function as a resilience-boosting factor in Western countries are seen by jihadists as more than simply a hurdle to be overcome; they can also be targets in their own right.

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

It is troubling that in the past few months the airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition have boosted jihadists' motivation for carrying out attacks in the West. This is true not only for ISIS, but also for Jabhat al Nusra (JaN), which is allied to al Qa'ida. The leader of JaN, Abu Mohammad Al-Julani, issued a warning in September 2014 that the airstrikes could be met by attacks in the West. This is the first time that the leadership of JaN has publicly threatened the West.

The attacks in Paris and Copenhagen also show that the long-standing motive of fighting those perceived to be insulting Islam can confer legitimacy on jihadists' violent acts. The various global jihadist combat groups are all keen to assume the mantle of the 'fearless true defender of Islam and the prophet', who would not shirk from taking vengeance. This is relevant to the Netherlands, which has been on the radar of global jihadists for years as a perceived Islamophobic country.

The attacks on Jewish targets, both in Brussels in May 2014 and again recently in Paris and Copenhagen, are a sad illustration of how global jihadism is still imbued with anti-Semitic thinking.

The establishment of a 'caliphate' by ISIS in late June 2014 was already a sign that the terrorist group cherished major territorial ambitions. In November 2014 ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi confirmed this suspicion by releasing an audio message announcing the expansion of his 'caliphate' to Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria and Egypt. Al-Baghdadi stated that he now regarded these countries (or parts of them) as *wilayat* (provinces) of his 'caliphate'. It is significant that he also used this message to declare that the other jihadist groups active in the above-mentioned countries should be considered dissolved. Later, in January 2015, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani issued an audio message in which he announced a further expansion of the 'caliphate', this time into the Khorasan region.

This so-called expansion into other parts of the Islamic world is mainly meant to serve as propaganda for ISIS and its sympathisers. The language used suggests that 'Islamic emirates' have been established in other countries and that these fall directly under the self-proclaimed 'caliph'. This propaganda appears to be having some effect: ISIS is possibly more popular now among young jihadists around the world than al Qa'ida and related groups. In reality, the power of the 'caliphate' is far more limited.

Another factor undermining jihadist unity is the ongoing conflict between ISIS and the al Qa'ida core/JaN, which has escalated in recent months. This is despite the airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition, which initially seemed to temper the deep divisions among jihadist groups.

The above-mentioned expansion of the ISIS 'caliphate' has only served to further exacerbate this conflict. Al Qa'ida groups, which have been active in several of the 'new provinces' for years, regard ISIS's expansion (and the associated 'dissolution' of other combat groups) as an outright provocation. Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) regard both the caliphate and its caliph as illegitimate.

A source of concern is that the rivalry between the two groups could lead each to take ever more aggressive action in a bid to establish their superiority. It is quite possible that both groups will choose to prioritise attacks in the West. It is also possible that at a time of internecine tensions and discord between jihadist groups, a renewed focus on 'traditional enemies' in the West could inspire the parties to close ranks. There is, after all, general agreement about who these enemies are, and any attacks on them are likely to be met with broad support.

The increasing chaos in Yemen is typical of the current instability in large parts of the Middle East. After Iraq and Syria, Yemen is on its way to becoming the next country to be torn apart by a dangerous mix of tribal, sectarian and political disputes. Geopolitical machinations are also playing a role in Yemen. Iran, for example, is rumoured to be supporting the Shiite Houthis and Saudi Arabia the Sunni factions in the country. This alleged support, and associated perceptions of it, contributes to the ever sharper dividing line between Sunni and Shiite parties in the Middle East. In Yemen, too, jihadist groups (chiefly AQAP) are threatening to profit from the situation.

### **International threat to Europe, North America and Australia**

One notable aspect of the attacks in Paris is the fact that the terrorists claimed to represent two different groups (for propaganda purposes, if nothing else): the *Charlie Hebdo* assailants professed to be working for AQAP and the hostage taker at the Jewish supermarket for ISIS. The investigation will have to determine if there was actually any prior cooperation between the perpetrators, and if so, what form it took. If there was, these attacks would demonstrate that the fierce power struggle at organisational level need not play any role at ideological level, i.e. among grassroots jihadists.

The Paris attacks have shown intelligence and investigative services that jihadists can be highly adaptive and are evidently capable of modifying their operational strategies effectively in the face of a more stringent surveillance climate. Another source of concern in this context are reports of identity fraud. Jihadists are known to be making use of other people's passports, thereby complicating the identification process. Another possibility is that jihadists

are staging their own deaths in order to evade detection. There are known cases of jihadists whose deaths were announced on social media but who later proved to be alive.

A week after the attacks in Paris, there was a counterterrorism raid in the Belgian town of Verviers in which two Belgian jihadists were killed by police in the ensuing firefight. A third was wounded and arrested. In this case the suspects were returnees from Syria and were believed to have links to ISIS. In contrast to what happened in Paris, the authorities were able to eliminate the threat posed by the individuals in question. The raid was part of a major investigation into a group of returnees from Syria who were plotting an imminent, large-scale attack on Belgian soil.

The attacks in Paris and Copenhagen have shed renewed light on the risks of radicalisation among young criminals. The perpetrator of the attacks in Copenhagen was known to the authorities as a petty criminal. He was involved in gangs and had a criminal record that included several offences. He had been released from prison in January 2015, a few weeks before the attacks. It is quite possible that he was inspired by the appeal issued by ISIS in September 2014, urging followers to attack 'infidels' in retaliation for the airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition. It is also possible that the attacks, which occurred a month after the killings in Paris, were a form of copycat crime. Both the Paris and the Copenhagen attacks were directed against two types of targets often favoured by jihadists: individuals, groups and locations connected with either (1) Judaism or (2) perceived insults to Islam.

It is not surprising that young people with a criminal background often feel attracted to jihadism. The rhetoric of the jihadist movement focuses on the deeply 'sinful' and 'morally bankrupt' nature of society. Jihadists appeal to young people's sense of guilt about their 'sinful' life and offer them a short cut to redemption, atonement and a strong social identity from which they can derive new status.

### **Threat to the Netherlands**

Although other countries are mentioned more frequently by jihadist organisations calling for attacks, jihadists have regarded the Netherlands as a legitimate target for some time, due in part to its role in international military missions. In this country we must therefore be mindful of the threat posed not only by individual actions (whether or not inspired by these calls to action or by Dutch nationals active in conflict zones), but also by organised plots directed by domestic or transnational networks or sleeper cells. The threat thus goes beyond the danger posed by jihadist fighters, although they are potentially a risk group due to their training,

combat experience, indoctrination and the possibility that they may have been tasked with a mission during their time in a conflict zone.

In the Netherlands as elsewhere, there are signs that a threat can also be posed by members of local networks, or individuals who sympathise with ISIS, JaN or other jihadist groups and have been prevented from leaving the country. In some cases the threat manifests itself in the actions of individuals, while in other cases it is more closely tied to smaller groups or local networks. Both individuals and members of groups have shown themselves to be susceptible to calls to action issued by jihadist groups. The threat may increase over the short term, as a result of current events: occurrences in the various conflict zones, official measures, (perceived) growing hostility in the public debate or anti-Muslim incidents.

In the past few months there have been new cases of radicalisation and jihadist travel from the Netherlands. As noted in the last two DTNs, there has been a small, yet steady rise in the number of people travelling to jihadist conflict zones, despite the deteriorating security situation on the ground. The airstrikes in Syria and Iraq have not yet led to a decline in the number of jihadist travellers. The majority are still men, but the number of women and families continues to grow, a trend cited in the previous DTN. The measures taken to prevent people from departing for jihadist conflict zones have not yet had any clear effect.

### **Risk of heightened polarisation in the Netherlands and Europe after the attacks**

The symbolic nature of the attacks in Paris has again served to spotlight existing concerns about polarisation in Western societies. Dozens of anti-Islamic incidents in France and elsewhere in Europe show that ethnic and religious tensions that have lain dormant for over a decade are starting to re-emerge. In the Netherlands there have also been reports of threats and graffiti. In the city of Vlaardingen a burning aerosol can was thrown at a mosque. In the wake of the attacks abroad, there has been renewed debate in the Netherlands, both on- and offline, about the limits of free expression, the position of Muslims in Western society and the possible increase in social polarisation. The recent outcry in the media and political sphere over ultraorthodox Islam (Salafism) and the potentially radicalising role of 'hate imams' is another facet of this trend. The way the debate on these issues is conducted influences the development of an 'us versus them' mentality. If nothing else, the attacks have lent a topical dimension to the way these social differences are perceived. It remains to be seen how radicalisation processes across the social spectrum are influenced by the attacks.

What is clear is that various far-right groups which have been decrying the 'Islamisation of the Netherlands' for some time are seizing on the terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen to further fan public emotions and intensify their protest actions. On 7 February the right-wing extremist group Identitair Verzet (ID Verzet; Identity Resistance) briefly occupied a mosque which is under construction in Leiden. On its Facebook page the group announced that the protest was the start of 'a series of acts of resistance against the Islamisation of the Netherlands'. The collective Pro Patria, which claims to defend 'the freedoms of Dutch people' and advocates a tougher policy on jihadist travellers and their sympathisers, also remains an active force. This too could provoke a variety of counter-reactions on various scales. Although neither ID Verzet nor Pro Patria has threatened violence, their actions are a source of disquiet and anxiety among Dutch Muslims.

On the far left, asylum rights extremists have again chosen to conduct a number of intimidating 'home visits'. In October 2014 protesters daubed slogans on the house of the Director of Immigration Policy at the Ministry of Security and Justice, and at what the extremists wrongly believed to be the home of an adviser to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND).

### **Social tensions could play a role in acts of violence by disturbed individuals**

In periods of heightened vigilance as a result of the domestic and international terrorist threat, the fear of jihadism can play a role in how certain incidents are initially assessed. This was the case when a 19-year-old chemistry student interrupted the eight o'clock news on 29 January by demanding airtime while brandishing what later turned out to be a fake gun. The incident caused considerable alarm in the Netherlands, in part because it evoked memories of the jihadist attack on the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo*. The suspect, Tarik Z., proved to have psychological problems. There were no terrorist motives at play. He is thought to have been obsessed with the security services for some time and have suffered from a persecution complex. Various mental health professionals have pointed out that at times like these, certain mentally disturbed individuals can be more susceptible to conspiracy theories. Besides the negative effect this can have on these people's mental state, on certain rare occasions it could also prompt them to act out on the basis of their delusion and become violent. For that reason it is impossible to rule out copycat actions.

### **Resilience**

People in the Netherlands are generally resilient to ideologically-motivated extremism and terrorism. During the period under review this was apparent in the unanimous condemnation, both here and abroad, of the attacks in France. It was encouraging to see that many made a

point of stressing that the attacks should not drive a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Dutch people expressed their solidarity with the French, and impromptu demonstrations took place in various cities. Various national and local Muslim organisations and mosques expressed their outrage at the attacks. There were also many spontaneous, local initiatives to affirm good relations between different religious communities. The Facebook page 'Nietmijnislam' (Not my Islam), which was created by a member of the public in the wake of the attacks, received a growing number of 'likes'. These initiatives show that social resilience in the Netherlands to terrorist violence is as high as ever.