Summary of the 39th edition of the National Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN39), June 2015

Threat level

Based on developments that occurred during the period covered by the present DTN, the threat level has again been maintained at 'substantial'. This means that there is a real chance of an attack in the Netherlands.

Threat to the Netherlands is real and complex

Since the threat level was raised in March 2013, the Netherlands has fortunately been spared any terrorist attacks. However, this in no way alters the fact that there is still an ongoing threat to this country. As in the previous reporting period, this threat is real and complex, and the factors that underlie it are as relevant as ever.

The complexity is mainly the result of the sheer diversity of actors and the interaction between them. On the one hand, the threat can be traced to individuals, some of whom are inspired by calls to action from conflict zones. On the other, there is also a danger posed by transnationally run or facilitated networks and sleeper cells. Copycat attacks by disturbed individuals are a further concern. It should be noted that there is a great deal of overlap between the world of Dutch-speaking jihadist fighters in Syria and Iraq and that of like-minded individuals in the Netherlands (both returnees and 'stay-at-home jihadists'). At the same time Dutch domestic jihadist networks are fragmented due to external pressures and internal dynamics. The complex situation bears out the observation made in previous DTNs that the threat is tied not only to jihadist travellers and returnees, but also to individuals who never leave the Netherlands. In addition, the bonds forged in Syria and Iraq between Dutch and other European jihadists could, in time, magnify the threat to Europe and possibly also the Netherlands.

Another component of the threat is the Netherlands' high profile among jihadists. Due to its participation in the anti-ISIS coalition the Netherlands is regarded by jihadists as a legitimate target. Visits by prominent critics of Islam to our country may raise our profile, as may the attendance of Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders at a cartoon competition in Texas in May. This latter event was the target of a failed attack by ISIS sympathisers. Although other European countries may figure more prominently in calls for attacks, there have also been instances where people (mainly individual jihadists in the conflict zones) have called for action to be taken in or against the Netherlands.

In the meantime the stream of propaganda, principally from ISIS and aimed at potential sympathisers (including those in Dutch-speaking areas), continues unabated. Once again, it is striking how much of the propaganda is aimed at women. Motivated in part by the pivotal role often played by women in the propaganda and radicalisation activities within the jihadist movement, women and children are now joining the more traditional jihadist traveller demographic (young men) in leaving the country. As of 1 June a total of approximately 200 Dutch jihadists (or jihadists with strong ties to the Netherlands) have gone to Syria and/or Iraq. Thirty-two Dutch jihadists in Syria and Iraq have been confirmed killed. Around 35 jihadists have returned to the Netherlands. The influx of returnees seems to have stalled in the first quarter of this year, possibly due in part to a fear of reprisals by ISIS.

Threat to Western interests heightened by international developments
The decision to maintain the threat level at 'substantial' is based in part on certain international developments, and indeed, the international context of the jihadist threat continues to be a subject of concern. The Middle East is increasingly in the grip of violence, which is spilling into more and more countries in and around the region. 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. Saudi Arabia has formed a coalition with various other countries in the region to combat advancing Shiite Houthis in Yemen. This war has taken on the form of a power struggle between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran. This power struggle, and associated perceptions of it, exacerbates the ever sharper divide between Sunni and Shiite factions in the Middle East. AQAP and ISIS use this divide to increase their following and thus their influence. The space that has opened up for AQAP to operate in Yemen is deeply troubling in that regard. AQAP has long been regarded as highly dangerous due to its anti-Western agenda.

International jihadist networks are looking to destabilise various countries in parts of North, West and East Africa, with consequences for the security of Western – and thus Dutch – interests in that part of the world. The internal conflict in Libya creates scope for ISIS since the governments in the region lack the power to drive the group out of the country and worsening living conditions could make the population more susceptible to jihadist ideas. The recent attacks on Westerners at the Bardo Museum in Tunisia, the Corinthia Hotel in Libya and the La Terrasse restaurant in Mali confirm the increasing threat in North Africa and the Sahara to Western interests, and thus possibly also to Dutch interests.

Increasing influence of ISIS heralds greater threat to Western interests

The conflict between al Qa'ida and ISIS is leaving its mark on the global jihadist landscape. Many jihadists and jihadist groups feel called upon to choose a side and swear an oath of allegiance to ISIS or, conversely, to remain loyal to al Qa'ida. The ISIS 'caliphate' has since expanded into new *wilayats* (provinces). The encroachment of ISIS into other regions prompts the question of whether the group actually controls and provides support to these provinces. In this connection it is worth considering that there may be another explanation for this expansion: autonomous groups in other regions seeking to express solidarity with ISIS and then committing violence in its name. Such territorial expansion is in keeping with ISIS's propaganda, in which it suggests that the 'caliphate' is growing all the time, despite the military operations being carried out against it. Boko Haram's decision to join the 'caliphate' is a major boost to ISIS's campaign to conquer parts of Africa. Of all the groups that have joined ISIS, Boko Haram is by far the largest and the strongest, even though it has lost territory in the past few months on account of military interventions by the Nigerian army and a number of Nigeria's neighbours.

Although relations between ISIS and its various *wilayats* take on various forms, it is clear that when a group joins or associates itself with ISIS, there is generally a corresponding increase in the quality of the group's propaganda and its use of social media to disseminate the jihadist message. ISIS also has an influence, whether direct or indirect, on these allied groups' choice of targets. For example, allied groups and sympathisers have carried out attacks on Shiite targets in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, in line with ISIS's strategy in Iraq and Syria. Along with the broader target selection and the professionalisation of propaganda, the commission of atrocities as part of a group's standard operating procedure is another troubling sign of ISIS's influence.

Besides the general notion that instability in various countries in the Middle East and North Africa generates scope for jihadist organisations and thus poses risks to Western interests, there are also signs that ISIS is looking to make good on its long-avowed intention to attack the West. There are also a number of observable indications that the threat to the West increases when regional terrorist organisations join ISIS. ISIS actively urges its sympathisers and allied groups to carry out attacks in the West or on Western targets in their regions.

In addition to general calls to jihadists in the West to carry out attacks, there is also individual encouragement coming from jihadist conflict zones, directed at friends and other like-minded individuals. The interaction between jihadists in conflict zones and aspiring jihadists in the West, as previously described with respect to the Dutch context, constitutes a major challenge for Western intelligence and security services. They are faced with a complex mix

of individuals and groups with continually changing memberships, which exist alongside the organised networks.

Strong focus on jihadists posing as ordinary migrants

In the period under review, various media outlets reported on the possible abuse of the immigration system by terrorist groups. Italy, in particular, had expressed concern about the large exodus of refugees from Syria and Libya. Although as yet unconfirmed, it is certainly conceivable that jihadists are using these routes to enter the EU clandestinely. In addition, there are concrete indications that attempts have been made to recruit asylum seekers in the Netherlands for jihadist purposes.

Thwarted plots in Europe and Australia

The reality of the jihadist threat was grimly illustrated by the attacks earlier this year in Paris and Denmark, described in the previous DTN. During the period under review, the governments of various European countries and Australia reported that a number of plots had been thwarted. In late April a plot to attack Christian targets in France was stopped before it could be carried out. Thus far, Christian communities and their churches have not yet been the target of a successful jihadist attack in the West. The French plot is believed to have been directed from Syria. In early May the German authorities reported that they too had thwarted a plot. It was thought that a radicalised couple sought to carry out an attack on a cycling race. It is not clear whether these plots were being directed by one of the jihadist organisations that have been calling for attacks in the West, and if so, to what degree.

Jihadist groups are highly adaptable

One of the reasons the jihadist threat to the West is so persistent is the adaptability of jihadist groups. For example, Dutch-speaking jihadists operating online have demonstrated their flexibility in response to pressure from the government and internet providers. Those living in the Netherlands have not stopped using social media, but have instead modified their strategy. They now choose their words more carefully, using cryptic formulations that are intelligible only to the initiated and employing technology to cloak its true message. Dutch jihadists in Syria and Iraq, by contrast, continue to spread their message openly, ensuring the continued effectiveness of the online jihadist movement.

The previous DTN noted that jihadists were adapting to more stringent surveillance by engaging in identity fraud, as evidenced by the discovery of hundreds of stolen or falsified passports from Western countries at an ISIS base in northern Syria during the period under

review. Among these travel documents were two Dutch passports in which the city of Enschede was misspelled, which may point to falsification.

Jihadists' capacity for adaptation can also be seen in their skill at moulding their message to reflect the pressing issues of a given region. Whereas the Middle Eastern branch of ISIS plays up sectarian differences between Sunnis and Shiites, ISIS in North Africa is starting to focus more on Christianity in its propaganda, in an attempt to fuel religious differences on a global scale.

Further evidence of this gift for adaptation may also be found in the similarities between recent foiled and successful attacks in Europe, both in the way the attack was organised and in the choice of target. Jihadists seem to prefer to carry out attacks in small groups and then flee afterwards. After all, the impact on government and society is particularly severe if people know that attackers are still at large, in an unknown location, and that they are willing *and* able to carry out further attacks. As noted in DTN38, the inevitable manhunt then helps foster the impression that a 'state of war' exists, the very outcome the assailant was hoping for. Automatic weapons, which are relatively easy to obtain, are used remarkably often in attacks.

Indications that the cyber capabilities of ISIS and its sympathisers are growing
A oft-cited threat is the possibility that terrorists will use the internet as a weapon or resource. As a resource, it is being used by jihadists to gather information from open sources about state employees whom ISIS sees as opponents, including police officials and military personnel in the West. This ties in with the existing threat to these groups posed by ISIS, which was discussed at length in the previous DTN. This threat, which would involve relatively simple attacks, has not decreased in any way.

When it comes to using the internet as a weapon, experts still assume that terrorists do not yet have the skills and capabilities needed to cause social disruption. Despite this, there were a number of striking incidents during the period under review, such as the hacking of French broadcaster TV5, which was claimed by the 'cyber caliphate'. However, it is unclear who was truly behind this attack and how technically advanced it actually was.
While jihadists seem increasingly interested in inflicting damage through 'hacktivism', their ability to do so has risen only slightly. At the same time, there has been an increase in the number of DDOS attacks and website defacements claimed by individuals connected to jihadist groups. Even relatively simple attacks like these can cause harm. Online

defacement, which involves the posting of text on a website, not only serves the propaganda aims of jihadists but can also foster social unrest.

Growing concern about aspects of Salafism

The ongoing crises in the Middle East and North Africa also have an impact on the transnational religious domain. Relations between different ethnic and religious groups are under pressure from wars, growing refugee flows, and political or religious radicalism and terrorism. Against this backdrop there is justifiably growing concern about the increasing influence of political Salafism. Salafism exists in various forms. There are concerns about the way that Salafist preachers are actively spreading intolerant, anti-democratic and polarising views. This ideology may be helping fuel jihadism. Although there is not always a clear boundary between the two, it is important to maintain a distinction between these problems. This is because a security problem demands a different approach and different resources than the protection of women's or gay rights or the horizontal effect of fundamental rights. In the period under review there were a number of public outcries about events to which foreign Salafist preachers had been invited. These are often preachers who have made statements elsewhere that are regarded as highly intolerant (e.g. with respect to Jews or Shiites) and anti-democratic.

Previously, the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) has noted the growing influence of the Salafist movement in the Netherlands. Concerns about this trend also find their way into media reports about a growing number of mosques whose governing bodies are increasingly dominated by younger Salafist factions. There are also concerns about Dutch Salafist welfare organisations. In the Netherlands there are various Salafist foundations active in the areas of education and social work. One highly active organisation is the Utrecht-based foundation AlFitrah, an umbrella group for various foundations with a Salafist bent.

Questions about the intolerant nature and growing scope of the activities of Salafist preachers and centres and their connection to jihadism are expected to remain a focus of attention for the press, the public and politicians. The commotion surrounding Salafist preachers and organisations can have both a positive and a negative impact. On the one hand, it has become apparent during the current reporting period that some Islamic institutions are thinking more careful about whether to invite foreign preachers to deliver lectures in the Netherlands. On the other, within the context of the larger debate on Islam in this country, a resurgence of the debate on Salafism could lead to heightened social polarisation, inter- and intra-religious tensions and intergenerational conflict. The emphasis

on the Salafist form of Islam and the media's sometimes simplistic portrayal of it will have a negative influence on the perception of Islam as a whole among segments of the Dutch population. For their part, some Dutch Muslims may wonder what influence such coverage is having on the government's actions. Questions have also arisen over the country's entry requirements for Muslim preachers, specifically whether non-Muslims who may want to incite hatred are measured by the same standard. Finally, the outcry over these preachers is seen by some Dutch Muslims as proof that the position of Islam in the Netherlands is under pressure.

Perceptions of inter-religious conflict magnified by propaganda and online debate

The attacks in Paris and Copenhagen have led to observable concerns among Dutch Jews and Muslims about anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. One place where such intolerance can be found is on the internet, including social media. It remains unclear whether such online remarks represent a continuation of existing discussions or conflicts in the real world, or whether the level of vehemence with which intolerant views are expressed is found only in the virtual domain. Owing to changes in registration and reporting requirements, it is difficult to obtain reliable multi-year data. In any case it is clear that certain utterances are a cause of concern. Whether occurring on- or offline, they can have a polarising effect and foster or reinforce a sense of threat. In the long run these sentiments could spur individuals or groups to take action to counter the perceived threat.

In the period under review, the notion has also arisen that jihadists are now targeting Christians. In part, this is ascribable to real actions and propaganda by ISIS; at the same time, it is also a matter of perception. Viewed in connection with news reports of a number of unrelated incidents that happened to occur around the same time (e.g. Christian boat refugees being thrown overboard by Muslims and the Al Shabaab attack in Kenya in which Muslim students were spared and Christians and suspected non-Muslims were killed), such perceptions bolster the notion that there is a war going on between Islam and the West with its Judeo-Christian tradition. The fact that these news stories are unconnected and that Christians are only a fraction of the total number of victims of jihadist acts does not alter this perception. It is conceivable that it may cause a certain segment of Dutch society to take ISIS's propaganda personally since they identify as Christians and thus feel they are being explicitly targeted. This plays into the hands of extremists (both jihadists and anti-Islam extremists), who argue that a 'clash of civilisations' is inevitable.

Relatively few violent incidents on the part of either left-wing or right-wing extremists in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands radical opposition to the government's asylum and immigration policy is the most active of all forms of extremism. In April seven asylum rights extremists were arrested at the former military base Camp Zeist for vandalising the fence of the detention centre that is now housed there. Despite the menacing language that asylum rights extremists sometimes use, there are no indications that they are out to commit violence against people. So far, they have confined their activities to daubing graffiti on buildings, making threats and conducting intimidating 'home visits'.

Another issue close to the hearts of left-wing extremists is (perceived) racism. Prior to the Provincial Council elections on 18 March, three houses and a car belonging to Freedom Party candidates in Friesland were defaced with graffiti. Responsible was claimed by a group calling itself 'the Frisian resistance'.

Various far right and anti-Islamic groups have tried to hold large-scale demonstrations in the Netherlands, without much success. Groups like Pro Patria and Pegida Nederland announced demonstrations to protest the construction of a 'mega-mosque' in Gouda and the 'Islamisation of the Netherlands', respectively, but both were cancelled.
 By contrast, the right-wing extremist Nederlandse Volks-Unie (Dutch People's Union; NVU) did succeed in attracting participants to a demonstration it held in this country. Even though the number of right-wing extremist incidents in the Netherlands is limited, anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic language is commonplace on the internet. These sentiments seem to have increased in both number and intensity in recent months. This has also led to hostile online reactions, principally from the far left. The internet is also home to many xenophobic texts directed at refugees and foreigners more generally which have sparked heated debate about the permissibility of such utterances. Although these texts sometimes contain veiled or direct threats, they have not yet led to any action in the 'real' world. Whereas Germany is grappling with a sharp increase in assaults on asylum seekers by right-wing extremists and even the possible threat of right-wing terrorism, this kind of violence is a rarity in the Netherlands.

Activists opposed to Dutch animal-welfare or animal-testing policy have again kept their protest actions within the bounds of the law during the period under review. This is in line with the trend observed over the past few years in which protests from such groups were generally lawful, with the exception of the vandalising of hunting cabins and the occasional clandestine foray into factory farms to record video footage.

Resilience remains still high

The period covered by the last DTN was remarkable in that the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen had a major impact on the countries concerned but did not lead to protracted social upheaval. This shows the resilience of these societies. It remains to be seen whether the ongoing jihadist threat to the West will undermine that resilience over the long term.

People in the Netherlands are generally resistant to extremist arguments that seek to justify violence on ideological grounds. This is true of all radical and extremist creeds in the Netherlands. Despite certain negative factors – calls to action by jihadists, online extremist speech and the knowledge that a relatively simple attack can have a major impact – violence is still rare, and the vast majority of people choose to express their grievances or pursue their political goals in a non-violent manner. In addition, the government and society as a whole are working hard to reduce vulnerabilities and manage existing threats as effectively much as possible. This characterisation of the country's resilience is certainly not meant to play down the threat assessment but rather to complement it.