

Summary of the 40th edition of the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN40), November 2015

Threat level

The threat level in the Netherlands remains substantial, which means that the chance of an attack is real, though there are no specific indications of an imminent terrorist attack. The threat, which is predominantly jihadist in nature, remains complex and involves a variety of actors. It is not only international and local networks that pose a threat but also lone actor terrorists. The relevance of the latter became apparent on 21 August, when a lone jihadist apparently attempted to carry out an attack on the Thalys high-speed train. This attack was foiled thanks to the actions of passengers.

This letter details the relevant developments with regard to the threat situation that have occurred since July 2015, when DTN39 was published. In September 2015 the House of Parliament was sent an interim update of DTN39. For the present summary it has been decided to provide an outline of the threat situation from July to early November in order to give the customary full picture of the threat. As a result, there will be a certain degree of overlap between this current letter and the update sent in September.

Jihadist threat to the West

The West as a whole is facing a real and complex threat. The European authorities are alert to the possibility of both complex, large-scale attacks and simple, small-scale ones. To some degree the threat to the Netherlands stems from the wider international threat. The conflict in Syria and Iraq and the phenomenon of jihadist travel to those countries are prominent factors in this regard. Thus far, it has not been determined if the attacks committed in the name of ISIS in various Western countries since the autumn of 2014 were actually initiated and directed by the central ISIS leadership. There are however growing indications that the leaders of ISIS are either involved in or at least aware of some of the plans to carry out attacks in the West. ISIS regularly tries to exploit these attacks for propaganda purposes, claiming that attackers in the West were responding to its call to action. Western members of ISIS have been involved in plans to carry out attacks against the West. From Syria, they recruit sympathisers online, give instructions to (potential) attackers in the West and provide them with target information.

Jihadist threat to the Netherlands

The conflict in Syria and Iraq remains one of the main sources of the threat to the Netherlands. Despite efforts by the government to stop people from travelling to conflict zones, individuals are still leaving the Netherlands at an average rate of around five a month. By 1 November 2015 a total of around 220 people had left the Netherlands for jihadist purposes. Of this number, around 40 have returned. Forty-two people from the Netherlands are believed to have been killed in fighting in Syria and Iraq, all of them men. The number of individuals from the Netherlands with jihadist intentions in Syria and Iraq is around 140. The death of men in the combat zone has led to a corresponding increase of the proportion of the women within the population of foreign fighters

from the Netherlands. For now, women are not actively taking part in frontline combat, though they are being trained in the use of weapons. They perform other tasks for ISIS, including online recruitment. The men who have been killed (in some cases by coalition airstrikes) were mostly members of ISIS. Turkey is still the only transit country which is being used by jihadist travellers to reach Syria and Iraq.

A growing number of jihadists from the Netherlands are managing to rise through the ranks of the jihadist groups they have joined in Syria and Iraq. Several travellers from the Netherlands have joined subgroups of ISIS that are focused on carrying out attacks in the West. The presence of individuals from the Netherlands in these subgroups serves to magnify the threat. In addition, a number of Dutch nationals have played or are now playing a prominent role in the propaganda activities of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN).

A troubling development is the departure of a member of the Dutch armed forces for Syria/Iraq in August. He is believed to have joined ISIS. This is the first time a member of the Dutch armed forces on active service has left the country to engage in jihad. The Ministry of Defence, which is looking into the security implications of his departure, has taken measures to reduce the risks. In response to this individual's departure, another former Dutch soldier, Yilmaz, who is now a member of ISIS, has called on Muslims serving in Western armed forces to follow their lead.

Jihadist travellers who have returned to the Netherlands pose a potential threat. However, it has been concluded that most returnees in the present group do not pose a violent threat. These are often people who were disappointed by their experiences in the conflict zones. In the first half of 2015 there were only two returnees, possibly because it is difficult to obtain permission to leave the 'caliphate' and because the prospect of criminal prosecution in the country of origin has a deterrent effect. It should be noted that it is not only jihadist travellers and returnees who pose a threat. Alongside the small group of people who succeed in leaving the country every month, there is another group of individuals who would like to leave and who could pose a potential violent threat if prevented from doing so. Moreover, the kinds of attacks by ISIS sympathisers that we have seen in other countries over the past few months are also possible in the Netherlands. Such attacks can be inspired by contact with, or calls to action from, fighters living in Syria.

Although a number of jihadists in the Netherlands have violent intentions, the visibility of the jihadist movement in this country has decreased sharply over the past year. A year after the notorious pro-ISIS protests in The Hague and Amsterdam, there have been no further public jihadist demonstrations in the Netherlands. This could be explained by the absence of charismatic leaders (who may be abroad or in prison), or an increased awareness of security in the light of a climate that is perceived as repressive. The fact that there is also less of a focus online on the subject of detained jihadists points to increased cautiousness and a lack of organisational capabilities and leadership. In the period ahead, judgments are expected in a number of terrorism-related court cases.

In recent months tens of thousands of refugees have entered the Schengen zone without being subjected to standard border checks. Although the current refugee crisis primarily concerns ordinary citizens who have been forced by circumstances to flee Syria and Eritrea, this mass influx of people does present certain security risks. Although all asylum seekers in the Netherlands are subject to screening, it is conceivable that jihadists or members of jihadist organisations may succeed in mixing in with ordinary migrants in order to enter the Netherlands clandestinely and illegally. From the perspective of a terrorist, both infiltrating established migration routes to Europe and exploiting asylum procedures entail the risk of detection. As a result, it is unlikely that these channels are being used by jihadists with great regularity. Nevertheless, European security services are alert to this possibility. Despite the occasional troubling indication that jihadist groups aim to capitalise on the influx of refugees in order to carry out attacks, there have been no confirmed cases of jihadists being sent from the Middle East or North Africa in the guise of ordinary refugees, to act as terrorist operatives in Europe.

Questions have been raised, however, about the ability of European immigration and security services to handle the current influx of refugees. On account of the large numbers of people entering the Schengen area, it has not been possible to meticulously identify and screen everyone. These unidentified and unscreened individuals are then free to travel on to the Netherlands. These holes in the network make it more difficult for the authorities to detect jihadists that might have entered the refugee system and to assess the threat they may pose. Although infiltration may not be widespread, certain people in the asylum system may be susceptible to radicalisation on an individual basis. Finally, people smuggling may also be a potential source of income for jihadists.

Developments in Syria and Iraq

ISIS's 'caliphate', which was proclaimed in late June 2014, has now been in existence for more than a year. Since then, various groups in other parts of the world have joined it. In Iraq and Syria, the core of the 'caliphate', ISIS has managed to hold its ground. Airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition, which have been carried out since late 2014, are hitting the group hard and eroding its sense of invincibility. At the same time, however, they have not significantly weakened the group's offensive capabilities. Nor has the group been forced to concede substantial amounts of territory in either of the two countries. It is mainly Iraqi and Syrian Kurds who have succeeded in recapturing territory from ISIS, with air support from the United States. Officially, the Russian airstrikes in Syria, which began in late September 2015, are targeting jihadist groups. Nevertheless, they have thus far mainly been hitting the relatively moderate Sunni fighting units in the northwest of the country. A further escalation in the Syrian civil war will exacerbate differences between Shiites and Sunnis, in Syria and beyond. Given the heated emotions among many Sunnis in the Middle East, Russia's actions may inspire more jihadists to travel to Syria. The British authorities have stated that there is a 'significant possibility' that the Russian Airbus 321 was brought down over Sinai on 31 October by an explosive device planted by ISIS. The crash claimed the lives of 224 people. If the Egyptian branch of ISIS, Wilayat Sinai, does prove to be responsible, this means that Russia, alongside the West, has also become a target of ISIS.

After the bomb attack in the Turkish town of Suruç in July 2015, which Turkey blamed on ISIS, Turkey announced an offensive against both ISIS and the PKK. Although the Turkish authorities permitted the US to use a Turkish air base to carry out airstrikes against ISIS in August and although they have stepped up efforts to prevent individuals from entering Syria, Turkey's policy on ISIS has on the whole been ambivalent. However, after the attack in Suruç and another in Ankara in October, there are signs that Turkey is now genuinely committed to combating the threat posed by ISIS, for example by tackling the group's presence in Turkey more actively or by monitoring the border with the ISIS-controlled part of Syria more closely.

For its part, Jabhat al-Nusra is trying to adopt a moderate image, for instance by denouncing the atrocities committed by ISIS. It has also emphasised that its current focus is on fighting in Syria and not on carrying out attacks in the West. The moderate image that the group aims to project has generated a certain amount of support among Sunni Muslims in Syria, but is in fact nothing more than window dressing. Jabhat al-Nusra does in fact intend to attack the West, and it has the ability to deploy its adherents (mostly returnees) to that end.

In July 2015 a targeted attack by the US is thought to have killed the leader of the Khorasan group, which is allied to al Qa'ida. The Khorasan group operates in Syria and aims to carry out attacks in the West. In the Syrian context this leader was the main planner and organiser of attacks, including those targeting the West. Although his death is a blow to the organisation, it does not significantly affect the threat the group poses.

Developments in the conflict between ISIS and al Qa'ida

Since the schism within the jihadist movement appeared since April 2013, the global jihadist landscape has changed radically. With the rise of ISIS since the early part of 2013 and especially since the proclamation of the 'caliphate' in June 2014, al Qa'ida's unquestioned dominance within international jihadism was brought to an end. At present most young jihadists and aspiring jihadists are siding with ISIS instead of al Qa'ida and allied groups, and ISIS's popularity is still growing. The position of the al Qa'ida core has been weakened by both the US counterterrorist actions against the group's leaders and the rise of ISIS. It should be borne in mind, however, that al Qa'ida and its affiliates are still a relevant factor and continue to pose a threat. Many of the groups allied to al Qa'ida remain formidable combat units. Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen remain relatively strong. There are also indications that the al Qa'ida core is gaining strength in a number of respects.

Developments in North Africa

The increase in the number of jihadist attacks has made it clear that jihadist groups affiliated with ISIS and al Qa'ida have had a negative impact on the security situation in North Africa, particularly Tunisia and Egypt. The attack in the Tunisian resort of Sousse underscores the threat to Western targets in the region, which has been on the rise for some time. In response to the attacks the governments of Tunisia and Egypt have adopted a more repressive policy towards jihadists. This policy, which is also affecting more moderate Muslims, increases resilience to attacks but at the

same time helps fuel jihadism in both countries. The destabilisation in North Africa, which is also affecting Algeria to a lesser degree, is caused in part by the chaos in Libya. Besides the training camps located across Libya, jihadist networks in the country have direct access to arms smuggling routes in the Sahel and facilitation networks through Africa, the Middle East and probably Europe as well. ISIS, in particular, has profited from the continuing chaos in Libya, which it is increasingly portraying as a potential destination for jihadists. At the same time, however, resistance to ISIS among other jihadist groups and the local population in Libya should not be underestimated. Despite the increased interest in Libya among Dutch jihadists, Syria remains their destination of choice.

Further internationalisation of ISIS

Previous DTNs have mentioned, on a number of occasions, the growing support for ISIS in various countries of the Middle East and North Africa and the destabilising effect this has had. In the period under review, there were again a number of new countries or areas where ISIS sympathisers began appearing or where terrorist activities were committed in the group's name. For example Kuwait suffered its first terrorist attack in 30 years, carried out by a Saudi branch of ISIS. In Saudi Arabia, following attacks on various Shiite targets, a branch of ISIS attacked a Sunni mosque, an act which can be perceived as being directed against the Saudi regime. In the Palestinian Territories, too, there are pro-ISIS factions that dispute the authority of Hamas and carry out attacks there. This further internationalisation of pro-ISIS groups in the Middle East could further destabilise the region and heighten the threat to Western targets in the region and, in time, the West itself.

Developments in Somalia

Al Shabaab seems to be using Western jihadists for suicide attacks in Somalia more now than in the past. At the same time there is growing discontent among the several dozen Western jihadists in Somalia over the way they are being treated by al Shabaab. As a result, several of them have been trying to leave the country in order to wage jihad elsewhere. This means that Somalia's appeal to Western jihadists is waning, a trend that has been discernible for some years.

Radicalisation and extremism

The new circumstances with regard to the refugee crisis are relevant to the threat posed by both left-wing and right-wing extremists. For some time now, far-right groups such as the Nederlandse Volks-Unie (NVU) and Identitair Verzet have attempted to capitalise on negative sentiments against Muslims and asylum seekers. Extremism is being fuelled by popular dissatisfaction about the large influx of refugees into the Netherlands. Extremist views are also heard with greater frequency. In the Netherlands, reception centres for refugees have been defaced with graffiti, some of which included far-right symbols. Various mayors and members of municipal executives or councils have received threats from individuals seeking to prevent the opening of asylum seekers' centres. This could undermine the local democratic decision-making process. In the town of Woerden a sports centre that was being used as an emergency accommodation for refugees was attacked by 20 people, and fireworks were thrown at the building. This was the most serious

incident of its kind in the Netherlands in recent years. Although there are no indications that any extremist organisations were involved in this incident, this attack can nevertheless be characterised as extremist, given the political motive and implicit threat of violence. Extremism directed against asylum seekers by small groups is hard to predict because it does not involve individuals or groups that are on the radar of the security services. In the Netherlands, violence directed against asylum seekers' centres is not yet commonplace, in contrast to Germany, where the number of violent incidents at such centres rose to 340 for the period from January to August 2015, a twofold increase over the same period last year. There are no indications that far-right terrorist violence, such as the attack on the mayoral candidate Henriette Reker in Cologne, is likely to occur in the Netherlands. Given the strong emotions that the arrival of asylum seekers can provoke among some members of the public, a violent act carried out by a lone actor in the Netherlands cannot be ruled out. It is therefore important to monitor trends in this area, given the ill-defined sympathies evident among some internet users with regard to supporting and committing acts of violence against asylum seekers, Muslims or other minorities.

In far-left circles the focus is mainly on opposing Dutch asylum and immigration policy and protesting the proliferation of the far right. Various protests against the construction firm that will be building a family centre at Camp Zeist have already been announced. The left-wing extremist group Anti-Fascistische Aktie (AFA) has a long history of (violent) actions against what they regard as the far right. The large influx of refugees has given rise to renewed activity in anti-fascist circles. In October the AFA sought to provoke violent confrontations with participants at a demonstration in Utrecht organised by the anti-Islam movement Pegida, which was attended by a number of right-wing extremists. This development entails the risk of new violent clashes between far-left and far-right groups, as has been observed in other European countries. The far left is also focusing on police violence, alleged ethnic profiling by the police and racism more generally, in part as a result of the death of an Aruban man after his arrest in The Hague in late June. A number of protest actions have already been announced in the run-up to St Nicholas' Day and the role of 'Black Pete' in the celebrations.

While a number of extremists remain active in the Netherlands in the area of animals rights and the environment, the focus is mainly on lawful forms of protest activity. The environmental group Groenfront! organised the 'Climate Games' in Amsterdam in August 2015, which attracted many activists from abroad. During a protest that week at a coal-fired power plant, two arrests were made.

There are clear indications that the tougher approach recently taken towards Salafist preachers has had an effect on the Salafist movement in the Netherlands. This could prompt some Salafists to take a more visible and possibly more radical stance, especially as some Salafists regard the renewed focus on their sect as an 'attack on Islam'. Within the Salafist movement, initiatives have been taken to forge a joint strategy for formulating a response to the external pressure. It is questionable whether these initiatives will succeed, given that the movement, as it exists in the Netherlands, is riven with internal divisions. Neighbouring countries are also seeking to bar entry

to radical preachers. Belgium, for instance, recently revoked the residence permit of a radical preacher from the Netherlands, because he had allegedly been active in the extremist circles which gave rise to the terrorist cell in Verviers.

Polarisation and causal factors

Social polarisation is an important factor for the DTN, owing to its potentially strong influence on radicalisation. Experience teaches that events abroad can have an impact on the situation in the Netherlands, fuelling tensions, uncertainty and polarisation. This was also the case in the period under review. The arrival of large numbers of refugees in this country is leading to growing tensions in Dutch society. At local level people have in recent years been organising themselves into committees and protesting against asylum seekers' centres. Given the rise in the number of refugees since September 2015, concerns about the migration phenomenon are becoming deeper and more wide-ranging among many people in the Netherlands. There are worries about absorption capacity, security issues and the government's overall response to the crisis. Incidents of violence on the part of refugees in reception centres or other negative reports could further exacerbate this fear. On the other hand, there is broad sympathy for refugees in the Netherlands. Because parties on both sides of this issue express themselves publicly in uncompromising language, they often end up face to face at demonstrations. The refugee problem is not expected to end in the near future, and so this polarisation and these forms of social unrest may persist for some time. In this light, the fact that most of the refugees are Muslim may further reinforce existing anxiety and uncertainty about Islam.

The Turkish military actions against the PKK in Syria and Iraq and the PKK's attacks in Turkey are leading to heightened tensions between the Kurdish and Turkish communities in various European countries, including the Netherlands. The attacks in Suruç and Ankara have only fuelled these tensions. In the Netherlands, too, these tensions are sparking acts of violence against Kurdish and Turkish targets. In July 2015 the official residence of the Turkish ambassador in The Hague was besieged by protesters, and the windows of a Kurdish centre in Amsterdam were smashed. The September 2015 issue of the ISIS magazine *Dabiq* called on readers to attack an institution in Rotterdam that was allegedly financed by the PKK. (The institution in question had actually moved to Frankfurt several years ago.) Such incitement to violence could further aggravate tensions. The current thinking is that the PKK will continue to mobilise its supporters in Europe but that it will maintain its policy of not engaging in terrorist violence in Europe. Similarly, there are no indications that the Grey Wolves, a far-right Turkish group, are planning on engaging in terrorist violence in the Netherlands. On an individual level, it is conceivable that violent incidents may occur, instigated by both the Turkish and Kurdish sides.

Resistance

In general the Dutch people remain resilient to extremism and political violence. There were no serious acts of violence committed in the Netherlands for ideological motives, and few Dutch people are joining radical groups. It is striking that, a year after the notorious pro-ISIS demonstrations, there have been no more physical manifestations of jihadism in the Netherlands.

There has also been a decline in open manifestations of jihadism online. Lastly, there are signs that the government's approach to foreign preachers has led to greater vigilance among parts of the Muslim community when it comes to inviting possibly radical foreign preachers to the Netherlands.