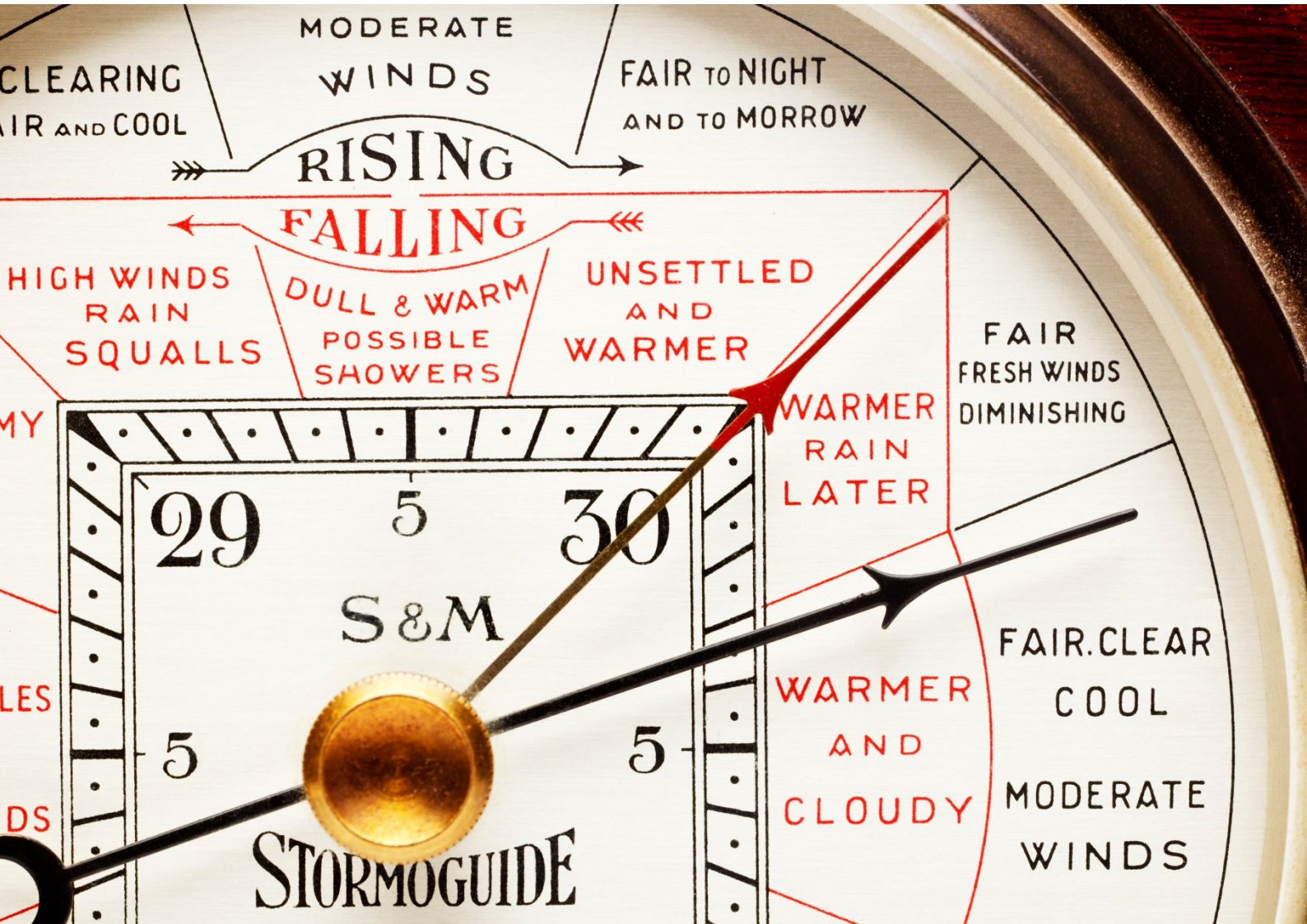




Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 42

July 2016



The threat level in the Netherlands remains at 'substantial', level 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. This means that the chance of an attack in the Netherlands is real, but that there are no specific indications that an attack is being prepared. At present the threat to the Netherlands is still primarily jihadist in nature, although the likelihood of violence on the part of the far right or the far left has increased since 2015.

Threat level

4



General threat level

The ISIS attacks in Paris (November 2015) and in Brussels (March 2016) and the recent attack on Istanbul airport (June 2016) show all too clearly the nature and scope of the current terrorist threat facing Europe. Attacks like these, or smaller-scale incidents, could occur again in the short term. It has become clear that ISIS has been systematically directing, coordinating and preparing attacks in Europe since as far back as late 2013. ISIS operatives (attackers directed by ISIS and their accomplices) have shown themselves to be capable of staying below the radar of the European authorities for an extended period of time. Even after the arrests of individuals from the networks connected to the Paris and Brussels attacks, there are probably still various ISIS cells present in Europe, and they may attempt to carry out attacks in the near future. In addition to the threat posed by ISIS, the threat of large-scale attacks in Europe by al Qa'ida continues to exist.

Extremist ideologies can be seized on by people with psychological problems or personal grievances to justify acts of violence. In the light of recent incidents in Europe and the US, it is clear that individual assailants continue to pose a threat as well. They may be inspired by propaganda put out by terrorist organisations, such as the recent call by ISIS to commit attacks during Ramadan. Others are being actively coached on social media by jihadists in Syria or Iraq seeking to incite like-minded individuals in the West to carry out attacks. There is also a possibility that non-jihadists – for example right-wing extremists – could carry out attacks. There is a great variety of both possible perpetrators and potential targets. The latter include large-scale events; bars, restaurants and entertainment venues; and targets with political, religious or economic significance.

Terrorist threat in the Netherlands

The presence of terrorist networks and cells in European countries also constitutes a threat to the Netherlands.

The Netherlands' profile

Among jihadists, the Netherlands' profile (i.e. the degree to which it is seen as a target) is relatively high. For some time the Netherlands has been regarded as a place where anti-Islamic sentiments are prevalent. Moreover, all countries involved in the anti-ISIS coalition are considered targets by jihadists. Countries like France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States are more often the focus jihadist propaganda, but the Netherlands' military actions in Syria and Iraq, which are intended to eliminate the ISIS threat in the long term, could raise the Netherlands' profile.

Jihadist networks

While there are no specific indications that terrorist networks are preparing attacks in this country, since the end of 2015 investigations of cross-border networks and attack cells have revealed an increasing number of links to the Netherlands. For example, in Rotterdam an investigation of a French network, which may have been aiming to carry out attacks in France, resulted in several arrests. Similarly, a suspected cell that was shut down in Germany may have had ties with the Netherlands. It is clear that jihadist networks are not constrained by national borders and that they can use the Netherlands, for instance as a perceived safe haven for hiding individuals or goods.

Apparent quiet

Since the second half of 2015 Dutch jihadist networks have kept a low profile, both online and off. This apparent period of quiet within the domestic jihadist movement has persisted into the current reporting period. This is due not only to jihadist travel to Syria, arrests and criminal convictions but also to a heightened vigilance within the movement and fear of government repercussions. Yet ongoing contact on social media between Dutch combatants in Syria on the one hand, and sympathisers and 'stay-at-home jihadists' in the Netherlands on the other, fuel the ongoing potential threat posed by Dutch jihadist networks. This applies to both men and women. Local Dutch jihadist or criminal networks that have ties to ISIS fighters can play an auxiliary role in the activities of ISIS networks in Europe. Such ties raise the chance of an attack in the Netherlands.

Jihadist travel

Since early 2016 the number of jihadists travelling to conflict zones abroad has been declining. As of 1 July 2016 a total of 260 people had left the country for jihadist purposes since 2012. Around 40 have since returned to the Netherlands, and 42 have died. This means that at present there are still around 170 people from the Netherlands in Syria and Iraq, including women and minors. The latter two groups are also counted because they too may pose a threat. Since 1 May children aged nine and up who have travelled to ISIS-controlled areas have been included in the statistics because ISIS is known to deploy children as young as nine to commit acts of violence.

Terrorist threat in Europe

Four months after Paris, Brussels was shaken by large-scale attacks by ISIS. The fact that a single network could carry out two major, multi-pronged attacks in short succession points to an increased level of professionalism among jihadists and a decline in resistance to their violent propaganda in Europe. Since the attacks, arrests have been made in many European countries, and searches of homes have uncovered material that is valuable for investigators seeking to track down jihadist networks in Europe. The results of this police work could help prevent new large-scale attacks by these specific networks. The amount of intelligence about ISIS activities in Europe has increased significantly since late 2015, in part due to heightened international cooperation after the Paris attacks in November. It is the assessment of the Netherlands' General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) that dozens of ISIS operatives are in Europe or on their way there, possibly for the purpose of preparing or carrying out attacks. Many of them are able to remain out of sight of authorities for long periods of time.

The coordinating role of ISIS

There are growing indications that the attacks in Paris and Brussels are part of a pre-existing, deliberate strategy by ISIS to commit destabilising attacks in the West. New intelligence shows that the leaders of ISIS have been ordering attacks on European soil since 2013 or have been involved in coordinated preparations to that end. It is certain that

ISIS leaders in Syria coordinated and directed the network responsible for the attacks of 13 November 2015 in Paris and 22 March 2016 in Brussels. Yet much is still unknown about the individuals who play a coordinating role in the ISIS unit in Syria which focuses on carrying out attacks in Europe. Until we have more insight into ISIS's planning and coordination practices, the West should take account of the possibility that there will be new attacks by the group.

Professionalism

The professionalism of the ISIS network that carried out the attacks in Paris and Brussels is troubling. The perpetrators have automatic weapons and know how to use them; they are capable of producing large quantities of explosives (triacetone triperoxide; TATP); they engage in encrypted communications, and they have managed to remain out of view of the authorities for some time. This degree of professionalism suggests the acquisition of certain knowledge and skills, likely in Syria or Iraq. It is conceivable that other ISIS operatives in Europe will also have such skills, for example with regard to the production of explosives.

Local support networks

The attacks in Paris and Brussels showed once again that terrorist networks directed from Syria can rely on the help of sympathisers in Europe who have never been to Syria themselves. In preparing and carrying out these attacks, ISIS operatives made use of a Belgian support network that included people who had never been to a jihadist conflict zone and were not known by the authorities to be radicalised. It subsequently emerged that several of the jihadists in question had been radicalised in a very short time. Such people are in a better position to engage in facilitation without attracting the attention of the authorities. Attackers also find support outside the jihadist movement, sometimes via close bonds of trust that have been forged in the past. Consequently, non-jihadist, often criminal networks can play a key role in the preparation or execution of jihadist attacks. Shared childhood experiences in the same neighbourhood or school, family ties, membership of a criminal gang, time spent in prison together, memories of fighting in Syria together – all these things can create the kinds of bonds that hold these networks together. Such tightly knit groups are hard to infiltrate.

Wide range of potential attackers

The recent attacks also show that ISIS deploys many different types of fighters in preparing and carrying out their attacks, whether in Syria or Iraq, the rest of the Middle East, North Africa or the West. All kinds of people can be deployed in Europe: not only jihadist travellers and returnees (i.e. 'foreign terrorist fighters', who have entered jihadist conflict zones from abroad), but also Syrian and Iraqi fighters and ISIS sympathisers who have been to Syria only briefly, or not at all.

Suicide terrorists

A major element of the violent threat posed by ISIS, both in the Middle East and the West, is the use of suicide terrorists. Both the attacks in Paris and Brussels were carried out by individuals who would probably not survive the attack, either because they would be detonating a bomb or because they intended to go down shooting. Currently, it is mainly adult men who carry out attacks, both in Syria/Iraq and the West. But as ISIS comes under increasing pressure in Syria/Iraq, there is a growing likelihood that women and children will also be used for attacks in the West. The current range of potential targets is now sizeable. Various security agencies have issued warnings over the past few months about the possibility of attacks at big events like Euro 2016. In addition members of the ISIS network behind the attacks in Paris and Brussels have been looking at nuclear targets.

Use of refugee flows

Jihadist organisations make use of the same travel routes as asylum seekers. It is now clear that ISIS operatives have frequently mixed in with refugee flows in order to enter Europe clandestinely. In some cases operatives have applied for asylum in European countries, possibly also in the Netherlands. Because of the possibility of document fraud, the absence of airtight controls at the EU's external borders and the wide scope for free movement within the Schengen area, there is a real risk that not all travel movements will raise red flags in time. Local jihadist networks offer support to individuals seeking to enter and leave Syria.

International developments

The various violent plots targeting Europe should also be seen in the light of the ongoing rivalry within the global jihadist movement. Both ISIS and al Qa'ida have found safe havens, above all Syria, where they can prepare attacks against the West. The threat posed by these organisations is shaped in part by the fact that they have succeeded in winning supporters and setting up cells throughout the wider Middle East (including Turkey) and North Africa. Attacks in the region (such as recently in Turkey and Saudi Arabia) attest to this. War, chaos and weak governance in large parts of this region go a long way towards explaining why both these groups have been able to take hold in various countries and to survive despite repression and military resistance. Thanks to porous frontiers, inadequate border security and criminal practices surrounding migration in countries in the region, including Turkey, it is still possible to travel back and forth between Syria and the West. In these circumstances the conflict in Syria has led in part to the consolidation of terrorist organisations and the formation of terrorist networks that extend across the Middle East and North Africa, and on into the West.

ISIS under pressure

The territory in Iraq and Syria under the control of ISIS is shrinking as a result of ongoing military pressure on the group. Despite this loss of territory ISIS is far from defeated. The group still controls large parts of Iraq and Syria. In practice, ISIS's territorial 'expansion' in these countries, which it boasts about in its propaganda, is decidedly limited. It has proved difficult for various groups affiliated with ISIS to gain actual influence in the regions where they are active.

Outside of Iraq and Syria the largest branch of ISIS is their affiliate in Libya, but there, too, ISIS is under considerable pressure at present. Although the Libyan branch has succeeded in expanding its influence there, the amount of territory it actually controls there has shrunk since February. ISIS scarcely exerts any control over either the province or the city of Sirte anymore. Recent setbacks for ISIS in Libya show that there is also considerable resistance among the local population against the group. At the same time, however, the local population is also opposed to Western interference. This is why a Western intervention in Libya could backfire.

Al Qa'ida attack threat

The rivalry between ISIS and al Qa'ida has led to a new balance of power which has not essentially changed in the past few months. Globally speaking, it is ISIS that holds the greatest appeal for active and aspiring jihadists. It is emblematic of the new power balance that none of the official branches of al Qa'ida have joined ISIS. Like ISIS, units belonging to al Qa'ida also have the intention and capability to strike at targets in Europe. This applies not only to the 'Khorasan group', which planned attacks on the West from Syria and has since been decimated by US airstrikes, but to other al Qa'ida units as well. Despite

portraying itself as a relatively 'moderate' jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra also poses a threat to Western interests from its position in Syria.

Polarisation, radicalisation and extremism

A focus on radicalisation is integral to the Dutch approach to counterterrorism, because in the most extreme cases radicalisation can lead to terrorist violence. Polarisation is an important issue because not only does it offer an outlet for feelings of frustration, it can also create a breeding ground for radicalisation. There has recently been a heated debate on racism in Dutch society, a debate that has sometimes featured insulting and threatening language. The arrival of refugees, coupled with a fear of terrorism, has led the far right to be increasingly open about its activities. Partly in response to this, since mid-2015 there has been an increase in the far left's sometimes violent opposition to asylum policy and to the far right. Reports of anti-Muslim incidents are also on the rise.

Salafism and radical Islamism

The cooperation between various Salafist organisations, previously noted in DTN40 and DTN41, has continued through the first half of 2016 and now extends to non-Salafist, radical Islamist groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Within this broader partnership, ideological differences have – at least temporarily – been set aside for larger common interests. This is a response to the evolution of the public debate on Islam and Salafism. In this way they hope to appeal to a broader group of Muslims than just their own rank and file. Salafist imams and mosques also see a role for themselves in taking a stand against violent radicalisation. At the same time, Salafist organisations have been exercising greater restraint in inviting preachers and in publicly announcing activities and lectures, probably due at least in part to government policy on problematic behaviour associated with these organisations. As a result, any undesirable activities by Salafist organisations may become less visible.

The far right and right-wing extremism

In the first half of 2016 there were fewer disorderly public consultation evenings about the reception of asylum seekers than in the fourth quarter of 2015. However, given the decline in the total number of requests for asylum in the first few months of 2016, it would be premature to conclude that there is any less opposition to the reception of asylum seekers than in the period covered by the previous DTN. The fight against (radical) Islam and the arrival of refugees also remain the key themes of far-right groups in the Netherlands. Generally, protest actions by the far right remain within the bounds of the law. An exception to this was the terrorist attack on a mosque in Enschede in February 2016. A number of arrests have now been made in this case. It is as yet unclear whether the suspects were acting as an organised group or as individuals. During this period a number of new far-right groups were founded. A striking development in this connection is the appearance of Scandinavian-style 'civilian patrols'. It remains to be seen how much support these initiatives receive. Some of these groups have already dissolved as a result of internal discord. Although the far right is again becoming active after years of relative dormancy, the movement continues to be plagued by its traditional problems of lack of leadership and coherence. This prevents such groups from taking the kind of joint action (at demonstrations and other protest actions) that the Dutch far left is capable of. Yet these groups do seem to have a certain momentum, which entails the risk of further expansion.

Left-wing extremism and asylum rights extremism

In the first half of 2016 Dutch asylum rights extremists continued their protest actions against detention and expulsion centres for failed asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

Asylum rights activists are expected to continue to protest against detention centres, companies involved in the construction of such centres and agencies such as Frontex. The new family accommodation area at the asylum seekers' centre at Zeist and the construction firm behind it have been the target of repeated protests. It is conceivable that these activities could become more serious. Nevertheless these activists continue to adhere to the principle of refraining from serious acts of physical violence against people. Asylum rights extremists from the Netherlands are expected to continue actively helping asylum seekers to enter 'Fortress Europe'.

Since the autumn of 2015 left-wing extremists have again turned their attention to blocking various demonstrations by the populist anti-Islam movement Pegida Nederland and, on a few occasions, the Nederlandse Volks-Unie (NVU), a right-wing extremist party. In counterdemonstrations in the first half of 2016, left-wing extremists have repeatedly used violence or the provocation of violence as a protest method. They will continue to seek out confrontation with right-wing extremists, possibly using violence. Using violence against individuals is not a common tactic for the far left, but violence against right-wing extremists is an exception to this rule. In addition, groups on the far left are calling on their followers to resist alleged 'racist police violence'. Finally, the Netherlands may also be witnessing a revival of organised animal rights extremism, but the number of people involved is very limited.


Tensions arising from developments in Turkey

There has been criticism from populists and extremists on both ends of the political spectrum of the deal on asylum seekers concluded in the spring of 2016 by the EU and Turkey. Critics contend that the Dutch authorities have not done enough to call the Turkish government to account for its conduct. A number of cases relating to the freedom of expression were viewed in this framework. At the same time, a certain proportion of Dutch people of Turkish descent are taking a nationalist/pro-Erdoğan stance. Such differences of opinion could lead to further polarisation.

Ongoing fighting in Turkey between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces is echoed in tensions between Turks and Kurds in Europe. With one exception, this has not led to any violent confrontations between the two groups in the Netherlands. If the situation in Turkey persists, however, it could further ramp up tensions between Turks and Kurds in the Netherlands. The PKK's frustration over the failure of the peace process, the flare-up of violent clashes in Turkey and the rapprochement between the EU and Turkey could lead to more far-reaching action on the part of PKK supporters or sympathisers, who may seek to push the limits of civil disobedience. It cannot be ruled out that individuals might commit violence against Turkish or Kurdish targets.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment

The Netherlands employs a system of threat levels which indicate the chance of a terrorist attack. In order to establish the current threat level, the NCTV publishes a quarterly Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN). The DTN is a general analysis of both the national and international terrorist threat to the Netherlands, based on information by intelligence and security service and police, open source information, information from foreign counterparts and analyses by Dutch embassy personnel.



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