



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Security and Justice

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 44

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Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Current threat level: Substantial



Introduction: The threat level for the Netherlands remains at 'substantial', level 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. This means that the chance of an attack is real but that there are no specific indications that an attack is being prepared. The main threat to the Netherlands is posed by jihadism, in the form of a variety of actors (terrorist organisations, transnational networks, small cells and lone actor terrorists) potentially able to carry out both small- and large-scale attacks.



1. Threat level

The attacks outside the Houses of Parliament in London (22 March 2017) and on a Berlin Christmas market (19 December 2016) are tragic illustrations of the jihadist threat facing the West. Such attacks are also possible in the Netherlands.

Attacks can be carried out by individuals or small cells directed by members of ISIS or al Qa'ida in other countries. Other attacks are simply inspired by ISIS, al Qa'ida or other jihadist groups. Despite the fact that many attacks are carried out by lone individuals, the attackers are almost always in contact with a network, to some degree or another. As arrests in France and Germany in late 2016 made clear, ISIS's external attack unit is still active, despite the deaths of several key commanders in Syria and Iraq. A major threat is still posed by al Qa'ida, which puts a greater emphasis than ISIS on plans for large-scale and complex attacks in the West. Beyond the jihadist threat, in various Western countries there is also the risk of anti-minority – especially anti-Muslim – violence on the part of far right terrorists.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

In 2016 a series of jihadist attacks were carried out in Western Europe. The Netherlands has been spared jihadist-inspired violence in recent years. Despite this, there is still a real chance of a jihadist attack in the Netherlands. Although there are no specific indications that attacks in the Netherlands are imminent, investigation of cross-border ISIS networks in 2016 did reveal an increasing number of links to the Netherlands. Perpetrators of attacks travelled through the Netherlands or had contacts in this country. Arms and ammunition have also been found in the Netherlands that were probably intended for terrorist purposes abroad. These factors increase, since 2016, the likelihood of an attack in the Netherlands. No new developments have been identified in 2017 that would point to a decline in this conceivable threat.

The Dutch jihadist movement

A significant proportion of the Dutch jihadist movement, both men and women, have joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq. Most have opted for ISIS; a minority, however, has joined Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly Jabhat Fatah al Sham and Jabhat al Nusra), which is allied to al Qa'ida. Over 40 of them have since died, the

majority of them probably in the battlefield. As far as is known, five Dutch jihadists have blown themselves up in suicide attacks in the Middle East. Dutch jihadists are conceivably also prepared to carry out suicide attacks in Europe in the name of ISIS or other groups.

The jihadist community in the Netherlands continues to attract new members, often relatively young people who have family members or other connections who are in some way associated with jihadist circles. Some of these young recruits are neither particularly knowledgeable about jihadist ideology nor strongly motivated by religious convictions for the jihad. For them, joining a violent subculture is simply another way of expressing opposition to authorities. It is clear from the international context that these types of individuals can also pose a serious threat. By tapping into their current or previous social networks, some jihadists – who in many cases have a criminal past themselves – can make use of the services of criminal networks, for instance to acquire weapons or explosives. The overlap between terrorist and criminal networks remains an area requiring attention. Local jihadist or criminal networks in the Netherlands that have links with ISIS fighters could also – perhaps unwittingly – play a role in the ISIS network activities in Europe.

Jihadist travellers' movements

In the period covered by the current DTN there have been few, if any, confirmed cases of Dutch jihadists reaching the war zones in Syria and Iraq. The main reasons for this are that these regions have become more inaccessible and ISIS has lost some of its appeal in the wake of a number of military defeats. As of 1 April 2017 a total of around 280 people have left the Netherlands for jihadist purposes. Of this number, around 50 have returned. The number of individuals from the Netherlands who are currently in Syria

and Iraq for jihadist purposes is around 190. The number of dead is 45. The number of jihadists who have succeeded in leaving Syria and making their way back to the Netherlands is still negligible: five in 2016. In addition a number of people managed to leave ISIS-controlled territory with the intention of returning to the Netherlands, but were arrested abroad. With ISIS losing ground in Syria and Iraq, the number of jihadists returning to Europe may gradually increase, but there are no indications that significant numbers will be returning in the near future. An assessment is made for every returnee, to determine if he or she could pose a threat to national security.

In assessing the overall threat, it is also important to take account of the children living within the sphere of ISIS and other jihadist groups. When children with a Dutch connection return to our country, they could pose a threat to Dutch society. The children have been subjected to a deliberate process of desensitisation and becoming inured to atrocities, these minors may be more willing to engage in violence. There is also a possibility that ISIS will purposely deploy minors to carry out acts of terrorism in Europe. At the same time, from the perspective of children's rights, these minors should also be regarded as victims of jihadist groups. As noted in DTN40, certain asylum seekers residing in the Netherlands could be susceptible to radicalisation. This risk could be even greater for failed asylum seekers living here. The possible hopelessness of their situation makes them susceptible to jihadist recruiting networks. For this group the chance of detection is smaller, since a number of them simply go underground and thus vanish from the authorities' radar.

Terrorism financing

Western authorities, including the Netherlands, are alert to the possibility that jihadists may start returning from the various war zones. Returnees who have been specifically sent back by ISIS

are presumably also receiving financial support from the group. It is plausible that the journeys of jihadists who return on their own initiative, without the knowledge of ISIS, will be funded by relatives and friends, who may hire smuggler networks for that purpose.

Attacks by far right are conceivable

Although it is jihadism that poses the main threat to the Netherlands, new attacks by the far right are also conceivable, given the steady stream of hate speech against Muslims and asylum seekers, perceptible particularly online. At the same time, there are no indications that right-wing extremists are plotting new attacks. During the period under review, several right-wing extremists were convicted of terrorism – a first in the legal history of the Netherlands. In February 2016 they threw a fire bomb at a mosque in Enschede. The conceivable threat posed by the far right rests primarily with violent individuals or small-scale groups that have become radicalised in a short span of time.

3. The threat tot the West

The jihadist threat to the West remains undiminished high. In 2016, 22 attacks known or strongly believed to be jihadist in nature were carried out in Western countries (in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand). In addition, multiple attacks were also thwarted, in some cases at the last moment. Several attacks inspired by jihadist motives were carried out in the West in the first few months of 2017. The jihadist threat has a structural character and will not disappear anytime soon.

ISIS's external attack unit and ISIS or al Qa'ida inspired attacks

The threat posed by ISIS's external attack unit is a key factor of the threat to the West. This unit has various operatives at its disposal which can

carry out attacks in Europe. This unit is still operational, despite the fact that a number of its experienced attack planners have been killed in Syria and Iraq. This was confirmed by the arrest, in late November 2016, of a total of seven men in Strasbourg and Marseille who had been planning attacks in France. Both groups were directed from ISIS in Syria.

Attacks can also be committed by lone individuals or small cells that receive instructions from ISIS fighters abroad. Other perpetrators have probably been inspired by terrorist groups like al Qa'ida and ISIS. Of the 22 jihadist attacks carried out in the West in 2016, 19 were committed by lone perpetrators, but in nearly all those cases the attacker was in contact with a broader network. In this connection it is relevant to note that ISIS's propaganda has been offering increasingly specific guidelines on how to carry out attacks. This could lead to more and deadly terror attacks in the West.

Attacks in surrounding countries

Surrounding countries have again been hit by jihadist attacks. In early 2017 there were attacks at the Louvre in Paris and at Orly airport. In London a 52-year-old man carried out an attack outside the Houses of Parliament, which was claimed by ISIS the next day. The man, who acted alone, drove a car into a number of pedestrians on Westminster Bridge and then stabbed a police officer. It was the deadliest attack in the UK since July 2005. In Germany, too, where there were five jihadist attacks in 2016, the threat remains high. There have been also developments in other parts of Europe that point to a more serious threat. In the Balkans, for example, there are networks with ties to ISIS that have links to fighters in Syria and Iraq.

Concerns about innovation

Another matter of concern is ISIS's proven ability to learn and innovate.

Members of the group in Syria and Iraq are using drones with explosives for battlefield offensives. The group's media channels glorify this approach, and this could serve to inspire jihadists in the West. This threat is particularly troubling, given how easily drones can be obtained in the West and how difficult they are to detect

Al Qa'ida's threat remains high

Apart from the threat posed by ISIS-inspired or ISIS-led terrorism, al Qa'ida's threat to the West remains undiminished. The latter organisation puts a greater emphasis than ISIS on large-scale and complex attacks in the West. Since the attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, al Qa'ida has not carried out any successful large-scale attacks in or against the West. Given the enormous amount of media coverage given to ISIS, al Qa'ida may appear less relevant, but this is absolutely not the case. Despite all the military efforts by the West – and the US in particular – al Qa'ida is still in charge of several international terrorist networks. It has the manpower and resources to carry out attacks, and it is in control of territorial enclaves in various parts of the world where attacks can be plotted. Military operations have killed several al Qa'ida leaders. There has also been mounting military pressure on al Qa'ida in Syria in recent months. Following the death of Abu Khayr al-Masri, the second-in-command of the al Qa'ida core who was killed in a US air strike in Syria, al Qa'ida may abandon its reservations about using Syria as a base for plotting attacks on the West.

Vulnerabilities

The attack in Berlin on 19 December 2016 illustrates a number of vulnerabilities not only in the way that European countries attempt to confront the terrorist threat, but also in the open societies of the West more generally. These vulnerabilities had been exposed by the previous attacks in Paris (13 November 2015) and Brussels (22 March 2016). It was already known that

terrorists had been exploiting the mass influx of migrants to enter Europe, particularly in 2015. Anis Amri, the perpetrator of the Berlin attack, came to Europe in 2011, probably without terrorist intent. In 2014 the authorities in Italy, where he had requested asylum, determined that he had become radicalised. Even after that, he was able to submit repeated requests for asylum in Germany, possibly in multiple locations. Both the Italian and German authorities tried and failed to expel him. In the meantime, once he had entered Germany, he was able to move freely within the Schengen zone. During this time he made use of at least 14 different identities. The members of the jihadist network behind the Paris and Brussels attacks also carried fake identification documents. If this network and Amri exemplify a larger trend among jihadists in Europe, establishing people's identity during arrests and border controls will only become more problematic. As with the attack in Nice in July 2016, a lorry was used in Berlin as a weapon, for the purpose of killing as many people as possible. Both ISIS and al Qa'ida have encouraged the use of this *modus operandi*. The use of lorries filled with explosives is a popular terrorist method in the Middle East, but the current practice in the West, where lorries are instead used to hit members of the public, is new. It is virtually impossible to protect the public from such attacks involving vehicles.

Jihadists try to strengthen their narrative

Jihadists have incorporated the recent measures enacted by the new US government into their propaganda. They regard the entry ban issued in late January (and subsequently amended) against nationals of Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sudan and Somalia as confirmation of their narrative that the United States is intent on war with the Muslims worldwide. Once again, the United States is being portrayed as the head of an army of Christian crusaders seeking to destroy Islam. These

measures could attract new people into the jihadist movement because they seem to bear out the anti-Western narrative of such groups. Over time, the reaction to the measures may amplify the threat to the West.

Right-wing and left-wing terrorism

Various Western countries are facing a significant terrorist threat from right-wing extremists whose chief targets are asylum seekers, Muslims and Jews. The attack on an Islamic cultural centre in Quebec in January 2017 by a 27-year-old man claimed the lives of six people. This attack illustrates that the threat of violence on the part of the far right is primarily posed by lone actors. Attacks by those 'lone actor' extremists, which some groups have actively encouraged (particularly in the US), are typical of right-wing terrorism.

There have also been attacks and attempted attacks in Europe from the part of left-wing terrorists. In March, the Greek anarchist group known as the Conspiracy of the Fire Nuclei claimed responsibility for sending parcel bombs to several government bodies and financial institutions in Europe. The group carried out a similar parcel bombing campaign in 2010. The current attacks were likely inspired by the aversion to austerity measures among anarchists in Greece.

4. International developments

The military pressure on ISIS in Syria and Iraq has only increased in recent months. Since the summer of 2014, this unrelenting pressure has cost the group territory losses in both Iraq and Syria. In addition, many of its leaders have been killed; their propaganda machine and sources of income are beginning to decrease, and the arrival of fresh foreign recruits has fallen off sharply. Despite these setbacks, ISIS still controls substantial swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq, and for the time

being it continues to demonstrate its resilience by putting up stiff military resistance in many areas.

Syria

In *Syria*, in January 2017, Jabhat Fatah al Sham (JFS) and four other groups disbanded and merged into a new jihadist group, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). This decision may have been prompted by JFS's fear that it would be excluded by the other combat groups. The merger was precipitated by fighting between JFS and other groups, and a statement from an influential council of clerics calling for JFS to be attacked. However, the new name and merger cannot disguise the fact that HTS is an al Qa'ida-allied entity that continues to pose a threat to the West. The US has in recent months also stepped up its attacks on HTS and the al Qa'ida core in Syria.

Turkey

For a variety of reasons, *Turkey* remains a terrorist target, with repercussions for Europe and thus the Netherlands. The main reason is the presence of various jihadist networks within the country, which could be used to carry out attacks in Turkey itself or to prepare attacks in Europe. In late 2016 ISIS openly declared war on the Turkish government. ISIS has since demonstrated its ability to achieve a maximum impact with relatively simple means. In the early hours of New Year's Day 2017 a single gunman succeeded in eliminating the security at the Reina nightclub and killing 39 people, including many Westerners.

Libya

In *Libya* the national unity government (GNA), with Western military backing, successfully completed an operation to expel ISIS from the coastal town of Sirte in December 2016. The expulsion of the jihadists does not mean that the fight against the presence of ISIS in Libya is over, however. As long as the country remains politically and

economically unstable, jihadist groups will continue to use it as a base of operations and try to win the support of the local populace.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Far-right activism and extremism

In the past few years, groups and individuals on the far right have directed their anger mainly at Islam and Muslims, asylum seekers and ideological opponents. Their focus has been largely determined by the increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015 and the ongoing jihadist terrorist threat. Given the steady stream of hate speech against Muslims and asylum seekers, particularly online, there is still a sizeable breeding ground in the Netherlands for new violence on the part of lone actors or small, swiftly radicalised groups like the one that attacked a mosque in Enschede (February 2016). In the run-up to the festivities marking the St Nicholas parade in Maassluis on 12 November 2016, information was received that right-wing extremists wanted to provoke a violent confrontation with left-wing extremists and people protesting against 'Black Pete'. Another noteworthy development is the establishment of the xenophobic and nationalist group Erkenbrand, which is trying to profit from the success of the alt-right movement in the US. For the first time in decades there is now a far-right group active in the Netherlands which has a large number of highly educated sympathisers. In some cases the threat posed by the far right appears greater than it actually is. The previously announced 'citizen patrols' (e.g. Soldiers of Odin or DSDA) have little, if any, public presence. They are, however, active online, where some people have openly embraced their views.

Far-left activism and extremism

The focus of far-left extremists continues to be on fighting the (perceived) far right and its supporters, (perceived) racism in the Netherlands, and repression and violence by the authorities and the police. Groups on the far left have announced their intention to continue protesting, even after the elections, against the 'shift to the right' in the Netherlands. In recent months there has also been a growing group of ethnic minority anti-racism demonstrators who often associate with traditional left-wing extremist protest groups like Anti-Fascistische Actie (AFA). During this period there were regular protest actions, some of which were unlawful, such as threatening 'Black Pete' with violence and daubing graffiti on 'colonial symbols' in public spaces. Asylum rights extremism in the Netherlands has not changed in any significant way since the previous DTN reporting period. There have been protests meant to intimidate staff at failed asylum seekers' detention and expulsion centres and authorities implementing what the protesters regard as inhumane asylum policy in the Netherlands and Europe. Both animal rights extremism and environmental extremism are currently very rare in the Netherlands; most of the activism observed in these areas stays within the bounds of the law.

Salafism and Islamism

In the Netherlands the General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) released a joint memorandum in 2015 reporting on alarming developments within the Salafist movement, the fundamentalist branch of Sunni Islam. Concerns remain about the growing influence of Salafists who seek to undermine the country's social and political structure. Foreign funding for Salafist centres and the wide availability of Salafist teaching materials and statements in the media help magnify

their growing influence. OCAD/OCAM, the Belgian counterpart to the NCTV, has expressed its concern about the increasing influence of Salafism in Belgium in a report of its own, which was leaked to the press in February 2017.

Polarisation

The electoral period was not marred by any major incidents. The campaign season had been judged to be a high-risk period, since it could be a time of heated public and political debate which, in such a polarised climate, could give rise to the belief that violent action must be taken to halt a perceived danger. However, this did not come to pass. The most contentious debates in the Netherlands centred on Islam, Turkey, the EU and the new US government. During the period under review (and in the run-up to the Dutch elections) there was criticism of the judgment in the court case against Freedom Party leader Geert Wilders. In December 2016 Wilders was found guilty of group defamation and incitement to discrimination. On social media the judgment led to fierce debate between supporters and opponents of the conviction. The pre-emptive exclusion of certain parties as coalition partners in the new government also led to much debate between supporters and opponents ahead of the elections. Opponents regard the move as undemocratic. Another noteworthy trend is the popularity, in various Western countries, of populist parties

that are highly critical of Islam and immigration. The above-mentioned entry ban instituted by the US government sparked demonstrations, unrest and feelings of anxiety among various groups in the Netherlands, including Muslims. Violent incidents at mosques and Islamic schools, possibly motivated by anti-Muslim sentiments, only serve to heighten this unrest.

In March the diplomatic conflict between Turkey and the Netherlands over a visit by two Turkish government ministers to the Netherlands for campaign activities led to serious public disturbances in Rotterdam. Many Dutch people of Turkish origin were perplexed and angry about the government's actions. This situation entails various risks. The fact that Turkish government ministers have characterised the 'no' voters in the upcoming referendum as terrorists could lead to feelings of insecurity and sow division within this country's Turkish community. Although the Netherlands is working to de-escalate the situation, in the longer term these incidents may lead certain groups of Turkish-Dutch people to adopt anti-Dutch or anti-Western sentiments. Conversely, they could also foster the growth of anti-Turkish or anti-Muslim sentiments. In addition, it is conceivable that the ongoing crackdown by the Turkish government on the PKK and (suspected) Gülen supporters will continue to generate threats, intimidation and even public disturbances.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands employs a system of threat levels which indicate the probability 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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