



National Coordinator for Security and
Counterterrorism
Ministry of Justice and Security

Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands 46 (DTN 46)

November 2017

Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands

Current threat level: Substantial

1

2

3

4

5

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 continues to be posed by jihadism, as represented by a variety of actors (terrorist organisations, transnational networks, small cells and lone terrorists).



1. General threat level

The threat situation has remained consistent in the period under review. The jihadist threat has by no means diminished. Both al Qa'ida and ISIS have the will and the means to carry out both simple and coordinated, complex attacks in European countries, or to direct others do so for them. Despite losing territory in Iraq and Syria, ISIS continues to pose a threat to the West. Online 'coaching' plays an important role in this respect. In the period under review, the Netherlands has been turning up more often as a potential target on the radar of individual ISIS members and sympathisers. Also noteworthy is the renewed self-confidence with which al Qa'ida is attempting to present itself as the leader of global jihadism. Although there are currently no concrete indications that any attacks are being prepared, both small- and large-scale jihadist attacks could occur in the Netherlands.

In Europe there is a growing threat of violence from right-wing terrorists, and sporadic threats of left-wing terrorism. There are no indications that a comparable threat exists in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, in the Netherlands too, a lone actor or a small, swiftly radicalised group could commit an act that would qualify as right-wing terrorism. There may also be sporadic violent confrontations between left- and right-wing extremists.

One of the risks inherent in the polarised climate in the Netherlands is that it could fuel radicalisation and in some cases lower the threshold for violence. This applies to all ideologies.

2. The terrorist threat to the Netherlands

The Netherlands' international profile

In 2017 various Dutch or Dutch-speaking jihadists, including members of both al Qa'ida and ISIS, have threatened to commit violence against the Netherlands or called upon others to do so, both online and off. The Netherlands seems to be turning up more on the radar of individual ISIS members and sympathisers. This is apparent, for instance, from explicit and implicit calls to carry out attacks in the Netherlands in non-official propaganda. In a number of cases the threats seem to be originating from Syria. Generally speaking, all countries involved in the anti-ISIS coalition are considered legitimate targets by jihadists. This includes the armed forces and military interests of participating countries.

Jihadist activity in the Netherlands and Dutch jihadist travellers

The Dutch and Dutch-speaking jihadist movement poses a conceivable threat. This movement includes persons who have travelled to jihadist conflict zones, those who have been stopped by the authorities while attempting to do so, returnees, detainees and friends and acquaintances who subscribe to the

same jihadist ideology. Terrorists in Syria or Iraq planning an attack on Dutch soil could make use of Dutch jihadists there who know the Netherlands and speak the language. It is troubling in this connection that ISIS in particular is trying to make full use of the network that foreign jihadists in Syria and Iraq have access to in their home countries. ISIS propaganda is being translated into Dutch and distributed among sympathisers. Both online and off, the Dutch jihadist movement is still characterised by a high level of security awareness, which affects the degree to which it can be monitored. In the period under review, several people have been released from prison after serving sentences for terrorist offences, and in the near future several more will complete their sentences or be released on parole. This may entail certain risks because being in prison may elevate a person's status in the jihadist community. Several ex-prisoners still subscribe to the jihadist ideology and may have been able to tap into new criminal or jihadist networks while in prison.

Sporadic numbers of jihadist travellers and returnees

Travel from the Netherlands to jihadist territory is rare, but it remains a possibility. In the summer of 2017 there was a failed attempt to travel to ISIS-held territory and a successful attempt to travel to northern Syria, where al Qa'ida ally HTS is active. As of 1 November 2017, around 285 people have travelled from the Netherlands to Syria and Iraq, 55 of whom have been killed. The number of returnees is around 50, and the number of individuals from the Netherlands who are currently in Syria and Iraq for jihadist purposes is approximately 185.

There are various signs that Dutch jihadists in Syria or Iraq, mainly women and children, are in refugee camps or in the hands of non-jihadist combatants. This means that indoctrinated minors may be ending up in reception camps

which lack adequate psychosocial and medical care. In the near future, it is expected that a number of people – some men, but mainly women and/or minors – will probably attempt to come to the Netherlands. They may seek to attract publicity, posing as victims in order to deflect the authorities' attention from the risks. The conditions in reception centres or prisons may also be used in jihadist propaganda.

3. Terrorist threat to Europe

The jihadist attacks carried out in the West in the period under review were mostly small-scale (with the exception of the attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils) and mainly the work of individuals (probably including the attack in New York in October). Even so, attackers may have become radicalised, either online or in the real world, as part of a larger group. In many cases these attacks caused limited number of casualties. This may be one reason why the impact of such attacks appears to be diminishing. Another could be that people are simply becoming inured to them. However, the risk of complex, coordinated attacks in Europe has by no means disappeared, even though in the period under review there were no attacks in Europe that could be said with certainty to have been directed from Syria or Iraq. We must continue to assume, as noted in previous DTNs, that there are ISIS operatives or sympathisers in Europe who are preparing attacks here. A number of arrests have been made that confirm this view. Like al Qa'ida, ISIS also continues to focus on the aviation sector as a target for attacks, as shown by the latter's plans to carry out an attack on an aircraft in Australia.

Recruiting and inspiring attackers in Europe could become an alternative to sending operatives to Europe from Syria/Iraq. The threat to Europe is therefore posed not only by people returning from jihadist conflict zones,

but to an equal extent by individuals who have never travelled there, but may be inspired, encouraged or directed by jihadist organisations. For this purpose ISIS makes use of the networks of its members who have travelled to the conflict zones.

Security services are alert to signs of jihadists infiltrating migrant flows and abusing the asylum system. However, it cannot be ruled out that jihadists may succeed in entering Europe together with other migrants and possibly abuse the asylum system.

Since July 2017, ISIS's official propaganda has been calling specifically for female sympathisers/members to take part in actual fighting. This call to arms can be seen as a relaxation of previous rules which allowed women to use force only for defensive purposes. This change in policy does not come as a complete surprise. It has been clear for some time that women are active in jihadism and that they carry out auxiliary and recruiting tasks. The fact that ISIS has issued an official appeal may push more women into using violence because they feel this stamp of approval legitimises such actions. It is conceivable that in the future women will be tasked with carrying out attacks in the West. ISIS-inspired plots to commit attacks in the West now involve women and/or minors relatively often, whereas until recently these two groups played virtually no role in attacks inspired by ISIS. It is likely that as soon as more attacks take place involving women, yet more women may be inspired to carry out attacks.

Although misinformation is not a new phenomenon, in the period under review ISIS has spread many messages that – possibly intentionally – contain inaccurate information, the most noteworthy being their repeated claim to have carried out the shooting in Las Vegas. To date, the gunman's motive has not been established. The organisation may be attempting to

spread fear, galvanise its supporters, undermine people's trust in government information or wrong-foot its opponents.

Jihadists also refer in their propaganda to people's reaction (or overreaction) in the face of real or perceived threats. This enables them to sow chaos and bring public life to a standstill even without mounting an attack. For instance, ISIS propaganda noted that an attack on a railway station can cause it to be placed on lockdown and remain closed for a lengthy period of time. In the period under review, ISIS presented the UK government's raising of the terror threat level after the attack on an Underground station in London as a success. In the cyber domain, too, jihadists are keen to make their capabilities appear greater than they are. According to experts, jihadist organisations are at present not able to carry out advanced, complex digital attacks. The simple cyberattacks that have been carried out by jihadists required relatively little expertise and few resources. However, such attacks are a way for them to gain experience. These cyberattacks, including website defacements and DDoS attacks, were primarily carried out for propaganda purposes and may thus cause unrest.

Other forms of terrorism

In various Western countries the threat of right-wing terrorism has grown in recent years, particularly in Germany and the United States. In the past two-and-a-half years, at least ten right-wing terrorist attacks were carried out in Europe and at least five in North America. In the period under review, both the United Kingdom and Germany experienced right-wing radicalisation within their armed forces, including preparations for acts of terrorism. In October eight people were arrested in France on suspicion of preparing attacks on mosques and politicians. It is striking that in the past year various right-wing terrorists have carried out attacks by driving a vehicle into crowds of people,

a modus operandi favoured by jihadists. This method was used four times in June, possibly as a result of the copycat effect (in Charlottesville, London, Malmö and Paris). There have been sporadic instances of left-wing terrorism in Europe too. Anarchists in some countries are not afraid to commit terrorist acts, as was apparent from the letter bombs sent earlier this year to officials of the EU and the IMF and the finance ministers of the Netherlands and Germany.

The Turkish government continues to call on EU countries to adopt a tougher stance on terrorist groups like the PKK and the DHKP-C, as well as the Gülen movement, which is not classified as a terrorist organisation by the EU.

4. International developments

The jihadist threat has in no way diminished. This is due in part to ISIS. Since proclaiming its 'caliphate' in 2014, this group has been active not only in its core territory, but also in other parts of the world. It should be noted that groups outside the core territory who are officially part of the 'caliphate' or associate themselves with ISIS control little to no territory. The rise of ISIS initially came at the expense of al Qa'ida and allied groups, but these groups have proved resilient and, if anything, their influence in certain regions has increased rather than decreased. In some regions groups allied with al Qa'ida also enjoy broader support among the population than ISIS, and have formed strategic alliances with other combat groups.

Developments in the Middle East and Africa

In Syria HTS's growing influence is a cause for concern. As noted in DTN45, HTS is allied with al Qa'ida. Although it is currently focused on fighting Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and eliminating competing combat groups, it may in the future carry out attacks in

the West if it considers that is to its advantage. In Syria and Iraq, despite losing territory including Raqqa, its stronghold in Syria, ISIS will continue to destabilise the region for a long time to come, posing a threat to the West and other parts of the world. ISIS may regain strength if military pressure on the group abates at any point. Ultimately, the threat posed by jihadist organisations can only be reduced permanently if a political solution is found to the root causes of these groups' emergence in Iraq and Syria, including the marginalisation of Sunnis in both countries.

ISIS in Libya is still recovering from the heavy blows inflicted on the organisation in 2016 and the spring of 2017. In the coming year, its operational capabilities will probably not return to anywhere near the levels of before the fall of its stronghold in Sirte. At the same time, the double suicide attack in Misrata on 4 October, probably carried out by ISIS in Libya, is a clear indication that the group is regaining confidence and that its activities consequently pose a greater threat. It is conceivable that in the coming months ISIS fighters (of various nationalities) from Syria and Iraq will join ISIS in Libya.

In Somalia, al Qa'ida ally al Shabaab remains the dominant jihadist group. This was borne out by the massive bomb attack carried out by al Shabaab in Mogadishu in October. The emergence of ISIS in Somalia in the autumn of 2015 has not affected al Shabaab's position. ISIS's influence remains minimal in Somalia, with the exception of Puntland, a semi-autonomous region. ISIS in Puntland posts messages online calling on the Somali diaspora to carry out attacks in Europe and the US.

Developments in Asia

In Pakistan and Afghanistan there are signs that ISIS Khorasan, as the ISIS 'province' in this region is known, is

growing stronger despite earlier setbacks. The organisation is most likely responsible for attacks on diplomatic targets, such as the attack on the Iraqi embassy in Kabul – the first time it has launched attacks of this kind. There are increasing signs that ISIS Khorasan is being reinforced by foreign ISIS fighters, who are very likely to have gained combat experience in Iraq or Syria. At the same time al Qai'da, too, is trying to strengthen its grip on the region, for instance by setting up a new group in Kashmir and repositioning AQIS (Al Qa'ida in the Indian Subcontinent).

In the past few months, ISIS's ambition to gain control of territory outside Syria and Iraq has mainly manifested itself in the Philippines, where ISIS-affiliated jihadists took partial control of the city of Marawi on the island of Mindanao. The Philippine army has since retaken the city.

In September 2017 hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar. The position of the mainly Sunni Rohingya and the perceived lack of attention for their plight in the West is a topic of discussion within the (Dutch) jihadist movement.

5. Extremism, radicalisation and polarisation

Salafism

Two exponents of fundamentalist political Salafism in the Netherlands who have been on the authorities' radar for years are encountering increasing difficulties. The leader of the Salafist foundation alFitrah in Utrecht, Syrian-Dutch Salafist Suhayb Salam, maintains strained relations with the local authorities and has had financial problems. Another figurehead of Dutch political Salafism, Syrian-Dutch imam Fawaz Jneid, has been causing tensions in The Hague for years, both within his

own circle and in his dealings with the local authorities. Both alFitrah and Fawaz appear to have limited support outside their own Salafist circles. The message that both parties are constantly suffering injustice at the hands of the 'unjust' outside world no longer sounds very convincing. In Salafist circles, however, the legal issues the two men are facing are seen as 'confirmation' of their position ('the outside world is full of hostile infidels'). The question is whether this will have a radicalising effect on their own supporters.

There have been concerns for some time now about the funding of Islamic institutions in the Netherlands from countries where Salafism is the state religion. For instance, in the period under review it was discovered that Kuwaiti charities supported Dutch Salafist organisations from 2007 to 2016. The danger with foreign funding like this is that organisations may, on the basis of certain (Salafist) doctrines, start inciting intolerance of people with different beliefs, fuelling tensions between different groups in society and encouraging people to take actions that contravene the Dutch rule of law and principles of democracy. In addition, elements of the Salafist ideology may form a breeding ground for jihadist radicalisation. There is also a risk of money laundering, fraud or even terrorist financing. An ongoing investigation by the Fiscal Information and Investigation Service (FIOD) into suspected money laundering by alFitrah is a case in point.

There has been a noticeable increase in Salafist tendencies among the Turkish-speaking communities, even though the beliefs and behaviour in question are not always identified as Salafism by name. This growth appears to be manifesting itself in the emergence of new Turkish organisations, the number of websites focusing on Salafism and the number of followers these websites attract. A possible explanation is that

this is a result of the more Islamist course charted by the Turkish government over the past few years, which also affects the Diyanet mosques.

Extremism

There are regular occurrences in the Netherlands of vandalism and graffiti near or on the premises of mosques and Islamic schools. There are also examples of mosques receiving threatening letters, as the As-Soennah mosque in The Hague did in June. The most visible manifestation of the far right comes from groups like Pegida, Identitair Verzet (ID-Verzet) and, increasingly, Erkenbrand. These groups are characterised by far-right ideologies, but they do not resort to violence to achieve their objectives. A cause for concern, however, is Pegida's more radical agenda in the past year, entailing a broader protest against Islam, Muslims and asylum seekers in general. The Dutch branch of Pegida is now working with far-right organisations abroad, including HoGeSA (Hooligans gegen Salafisten) in Germany. In the period under review, ID-Verzet temporarily occupied Islamic buildings, such as the Salafist Cornelius Haga Lyceum in Amsterdam and a mosque under construction in Venlo. Unlike other identitarian groups in Europe, however, ID-Verzet remains limited in size. There are also still concerns about Erkenbrand. Both online and off, the group is working to expand the number of followers of its racist ideology.

There are sporadic confrontations in the Netherlands between left- and right-wing extremists. In some cases, the left-wing extremists have made threats or thrown fireworks at their opponents. In the period under review, the front door of the parliamentary party leader of the Forum for Democracy (FVD) was defaced, which attracted a lot of media attention. Responsibility was claimed on the internet by a group under the alias Radicaal Anarchistisch Feministisch Front (Radical Anarchist Feminist

Front). The risk of large-scale violent public order disturbances like in the US and Germany is small in the Netherlands, partly thanks to active policing, but it cannot be ruled out completely. A number of relatively new far-left anti-racist activist groups consist mainly of activists with migrant backgrounds. They are fighting against what they perceive to be racist and colonial symbols in Dutch society, such as Black Pete, the Dutch East India Company, street names and statues. The best known of these groups are Kick Out Zwarte Piet and De Grauwe Eeuw (The Grey Age).

Anarchist activists from all over Europe, including the Netherlands, are in contact with each other and sometimes work together. For several days during the G20 summit in Hamburg in July, hundreds of left-wing extremists fought pitched battles with the police and vandalised the city. Dutch nationals were among them. In recent months, far-left asylum rights extremists have carried out fewer illegal activities than in previous years. Nonetheless, politicians, agencies and companies involved in developing, implementing and facilitating related policy, and their staff, may find themselves the target of vandalism (such as defacement) and 'home visits', as illustrated by the online publication in October of a list of names of staff members of the Repatriation and Departure Service. No environmental or animal rights extremist activities were noted in the Netherlands in this DTN period.

Polarisation

The DTN addresses negative forms of polarisation because these can set the stage for radicalisation processes. The topics discussed below have been chosen because they have given rise to a polarised debate on social media.

Looking back on the period under review, it can be said that the Dutch security authorities are alert, including in situations where in hindsight the

terrorist threat was not as severe as first thought, or was even non-existent, which was the case with the cancellation of a concert in Rotterdam. An unfortunate side effect of this can be, on the one hand, that the public and the media may overestimate the threat or think that the authorities are exaggerating. On the other hand, some people may get the impression that the authorities are deliberately playing down the threat. For instance, there were doubts about the veracity of the authorities' version of events when a diabetic man became unwell and drove into people at Amsterdam central station. 'Threat fatigue' may also set in, which can undermine the alertness of the security sector and the public at large.

A case of fraud at the municipality of Amsterdam, which attracted a great deal of political and media attention, has had a nationwide impact. It fuelled distrust among parts of the population against government authorities, their approach to radicalisation and the use of experts from ethnic or religious minorities.

Although the emphasis in polarised online discussions can vary from

country to country, there are also striking similarities among Western countries. Many countries are now revisiting black pages in their colonial history and reappraising monuments referring to those periods. There is a focus on the perceived irreconcilability of 'the West' and 'Islam', and on the role of the political and cultural 'elite'. In the period under review, the term 'cultural Marxism' came back into use in right-wing populist circles. It is generally taken to mean that governments in Europe are out to destroy European culture.

The concerns noted in DTN45 with regard to Turkish paramilitary gangs have not disappeared. As regards the Netherlands, however, only online activities have been noted in the period under review. These activities may cause tensions between ideological opponents.

Although the period under review was relatively calm, the risk of tensions in Turkey being imported to the Netherlands remains real, and in this respect the attitudes adopted by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the PKK are crucial.

About the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands

The Netherlands uses a system of threat levels that indicate the likelihood of a terrorist attack. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) publishes the Terrorist Threat Assessment for the Netherlands (DTN) four times a year. The DTN presents a broad outline of the threat to the Netherlands posed by domestic and international terrorism. The DTN is based on information from the intelligence and security services, the police, public sources and foreign partners, and on analyses by embassy staff.

Published by

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and Counterterrorism (NCTV)

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November 2017